

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 91



PESAR KHALEH پسر خاله

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CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

A glove puppet is a bag with a face.

That is not a slight. It is the whole of the engineering. There is no mechanism inside it, no armature, no joints, nothing that moves on its own. It is cloth and a head and two arms, and it weighs about as much as a folded shirt, and laid on a table it is a rag.

Everything it has ever done was done by a hand.

The hand belongs to somebody kneeling below the level of the stage with their arm above their head, and they are usually not the person doing the voice, and neither of them is the person who wrote the words. Three people and a bag, and the audience sees one character, and loves it, and could not name any of the three.

Children work this out and then decide, actively, not to know it. You can watch it happen in a room. A boy of six will pick up a puppet, put his own hand in, understand the entire apparatus in four seconds, put it down, and go back to believing.

That is not stupidity. That is the most sophisticated thing a person does, and most of us stop being able to do it at about eleven, and the ones who can still do it at forty end up in this trade.

The plate opposite shows a glove puppet on a table with nobody's hand in it.



THE STANDING OF THE CASE

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

Seven of these notebooks have been kept.

WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE

Manuchehr Delgoshā, called Manu, sixty-five, Tehran. Writes jokes that other people say out loud. Has never performed and has never had a byline, and is the most widely read unpublished writer in the Persian language. Keeps these notebooks.

His mother, ninety-two. Funnier than her son. Has never told a joke in her life.

His father, ninety-four. Calibrated industrial scales from 1978 and had no sense of humour whatsoever. Read every page his son wrote, every Friday, for forty-four years.

Roshanak Azimi, thirty-five. From Javadiyeh in the south of Tehran, by way of Stockholm, now Los Angeles. Came ninth in the national university entrance examination out of six hundred thousand. Is about to become extremely famous.

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

WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Eighteen years ago, in a basement, Payam performed eleven words written by his brother, under his own name, and was arrested. Manu could not say the words were his, because saying so required a claim, and the claim was the only dangerous part of the arrangement.

Fifteen years ago the words came loose and ended up on television in the mouth of a man who believed he had written them.

Thirteen years ago he wrote nine minutes for a young woman who could leave, and she left, and afterwards in a corridor she said six words and he laughed for the first time in eighteen years.

Eleven years ago his broker of twenty-six years died, he began giving his work away for nothing to rooms across Tehran, and a name with two halves in it was put on the material he and Roshanak were making together.

Six years ago somebody trained a machine on nine years of that work.

Two years ago a researcher wrote to him and he drafted a reply and did not send it.

The seven days are over. He has not said anything.

SYNOPSIS

For forty years Manuchehr Delgoshā has kept one rule: cruel about the arrangement, never about the person. Every joke he has ever sold is aimed at a ministry, a form, a queue, a euphemism. Never a man. It is the reason four hundred rooms trust him and it is the only thing he has that could be called an ethic.

At sixty-five he begins writing the other kind. Not to sell — into a notebook, deliberately, the material he has refused for four decades. It is the best work of his life and none of it can ever leave the flat.

Then his father dies, and among the effects there is a notebook nobody knew about, and it runs to four hundred pages, and it is in a hand he has known since he was four.

Ninety-six entries, two of which run past ten pages, in the shape of a treatise censored in every edition printed since. A book about a man who read every page his son ever wrote and said four words, and about what he was doing upstairs for sixty years, and about the woman he was married to for sixty-one years and never once told.

The dots are still not an absence.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

My grandmother told me she loved me by asking whether I had eaten.

She asked it every time, for thirty years, at the door, before anything else, and if you said yes she said no you have not, and put a plate down that you had not requested and did not want and finished entirely. She did this through a war and a revolution and two currencies, and she did it when there was very little, and she did it four days before she died.

She never said the word. Not once, in my hearing, to anybody. And her husband never said it either, and neither of my parents said it to each other in front of us, and I did not hear it said aloud in a Persian house until I was about nineteen and it was in a film.

I want to be careful here, because there is a version of this observation that is an accusation, and it is not one.

They were not withholding it. They were saying it constantly, in a register with no vocabulary, and everybody in the room was fluent. The plate is the sentence. The gold bought quietly when nobody was talking is the sentence. The disease invented at a school door and maintained for six years is the sentence. Forty-four years of reading every page to the bottom and back to check something in the middle is the sentence.

It is an entire language and it is precise and it works, and it has exactly one flaw, which is that it cannot be quoted. Nobody can repeat it to you afterwards. Nobody can hold it up in a bad year and read it again. When the person is gone there is no record, because the whole thing was made of acts, and acts do not keep.

I have been thinking for two years about what it costs to grow up completely fluent in a language you cannot write down, and then to spend your life in a trade that is nothing but writing things down.

Chew Z

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I. WHAT I DID NOT WRITE

1.

I have started writing the other kind and I want to record the date, because I have a feeling I am going to want to know when this began.

2.

The rule is this and it has been this since I was about nineteen.

Cruel about the arrangement. Never about the person.

You may go after the ministry, the form, the queue, the committee, the euphemism, the seating, the man in the office in his capacity as a man in an office. You may not go after him.

I have kept it for forty years and it is the only thing in my life that has anything like the shape of a principle, and I have never written it down until this week, and I notice that writing it down has made it look smaller.

3.

It is also, and I have known this since about 1999, the reason I am any good.

A room will forgive you almost anything if it can feel that you are pointing upward. The moment you point at a person — a specific one, in the room or out of it — something closes, and it closes in the body before anybody has decided anything, and you can hear it from the back.

That is not morality. That is acoustics.

4.

And in forty years I have thrown away, by my estimate, somewhere between nine and eleven thousand pieces of material.

Not because they were bad. Because they were about somebody.

Four of them, since this notebook is mine and nobody will ever read it.

Not the whole pieces. The shapes, so that in ten years I can look at this page and remember what I was doing in the autumn of my sixty-fifth year.

The one about my uncle and the compensation certificate, which is about a specific afternoon in 2017 and a specific kitchen and a man crying in it, and which is warm, and which he would never recover from.

The one about the woman on the fourth floor who has been telling the same story about her husband for nineteen years and who has changed one detail in it four times, and I have a list of the changes and the dates.

The one about Vahid, who is dead, which I could publish tomorrow and which I am not going to, and I have thought about why for four months and the answer is that he cannot object and that is exactly the problem.

And the one about my mother, which I am not going to describe.

What they are not is cruel.

I expected them to be. I sat down in Mehr expecting to find that I had been keeping a lid on something ugly for forty years, and what is under the lid is **tenderness**, which is worse — because tenderness about a specific person is the most exposing thing a man can put on paper, and there is no arrangement to hide behind.

You can be savage about a ministry your whole life and never once say anything about yourself.

5.

They have announced that the electricity will be stable this winter.

6.

So: a notebook. A new one, the ordinary kind from the shop under the flyover with the good paper, and in it I am going to write the ones I did not write.

Not for Vahid, who is dead. Not for the channel or the three men on television or the forty rooms. Not for the thing with the name.

For the notebook.

7.

The first night produced four and I could not get through the second one.

I mean that physically. I put the pen down twice and stood up and went and looked at the kitchen, which I have been doing at four in the morning for thirty-eight years, and came back and could not continue.

It was about a man I have known since 1997 and it was entirely true and it took about nine seconds to build, and it is the funniest thing I have written this decade, and if he read it he would not speak to me again and he would be right.

8.

That is the discovery of the first month and it is not what I expected.

They are better.

Not marginally. Not interestingly. They are a different class of work and they arrive faster and they need less repair, and a room would take them the way a room takes something it recognises, and I have been sitting on the largest and best body of material in my possession for forty years on the grounds of manners.

On what it costs, which I did not expect and which I am going to set down in detail because nobody warned me.

I assumed the difficulty would be nerve. That I would find them hard to write because I would flinch.

I do not flinch. That is not the problem. They arrive faster than anything has arrived in twenty years and they need almost no repair, and I have written four in a night twice this winter, which has not happened since I was forty.

The cost is afterwards, and it is physical, and it is specific.

I cannot see the person properly for about four days.

I wrote the one about my uncle in Mehr and I went to a gathering nine days later and I could not look at him. Not from guilt — I have not done anything to him, the thing is in a notebook in a drawer and will die there.

It is that I have taken him apart and I can now see the parts, and a man you can see the parts of is not somebody you can sit and drink tea with, and it wears off, and it takes about four days, and I have done it to eleven people so far and four of them are family.

Which is what the rule was for.

I have spent this whole notebook congratulating myself on discovering that a forty-year principle was a manners problem, and it was not a manners problem.

It was a technique for staying able to sit in a room with people.

I did not build it to protect them. I built it at nineteen to protect the part of me that could still have a conversation, and I have been describing it as an ethic ever since because that sounded better, and my father would have found that distinction in about four seconds and written down a number.

9.

I do not think the rule was wrong.

I want that on the page, on the date, before I go any further, because in about four months I am going to be very pleased with myself and I would like there to be a record of the part where I was not.

The rule is correct. The rule is why the forty rooms take my paper without asking what is in it, and why nobody has ever come to my door about anything I wrote, and why my brother is the only person in this family who has ever been arrested for a sentence and he is not the one who wrote it.

The rule is load-bearing and I have just found out how much it was holding up.

10.

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

from the Delgoshā

A man kept a locked room in his house for forty years and told his guests it was empty, and when he died they broke the door and found it was, and were disappointed, and he had known they would be.

11.

LOS ANGELES · The Forum · 8 January · 17,400 in · English

Seventeen thousand four hundred.

I am writing that number down because in four years nobody will believe me about the part before it and I want the arithmetic somewhere.

Six years ago I was doing eleven minutes at ten to one in the morning in front of forty people, four of whom were the other comics, and driving ninety minutes home down the 10 with the windows open because otherwise I fell asleep.

12.

The special went in October. Netflix, an hour, my name on it, my face on it, nobody else's name above mine on anything.

Fifty-one million households in the first month.

I do not know what fifty-one million households is. Nobody knows what that is. It is not a room. You cannot feel fifty-one million anything, and the entire apparatus I have spent seventeen years building — the instrument, the count, the body — reads nothing at all from a number like that.

13.

The late shows in November, three of them, in eleven days. Then the one in New York with the band and the cue cards, which I did in February, and which I have been asked about more than the special.

Five minutes and forty seconds, live, on a Saturday, and I want to write down the only thing about it that was interesting, which is that **it is the first room I have ever been in where I could not feel the audience at all.**

Not because they were cold. Because there are cameras between you and them and the cameras have opinions, and the room has been trained for fifty years to laugh at a thing it can see is being

filmed, and what comes back at you is not a response, it is a **protocol.**

I did fine. I did better than fine.

And I came off and stood in a corridor and could not tell you whether one single person had actually gone.

On being famous, since I have now been it for eighteen months and nobody writes this part down honestly.

It is not what anybody tells you and it is not the opposite of what anybody tells you, which is the other lie.

The actual content of it: I am recognised about four times a day. It is pleasant. People are almost always kind and they almost always say the same four sentences, and I have the same four back, and the whole exchange takes eleven seconds and neither of us is in it.

Nothing else has changed. The work is the same work. The hour before is the same hour before. The drive home is the same drive except that there is a person in the car now, which is worse.

The one real difference, and nobody says this: I can no longer work a room out.

Seventeen years of walking into a place and reading it in ninety seconds — who is drunk, who has been dragged along, who is on a date and paid, where the heat is. That instrument is gone, because they have all seen the special, and what is in front of me is not a room. **It is a verdict that arrived before I did.**

They laugh in the first four seconds. At nothing. At me being there. You cannot build on that and you cannot escalate it, and it is precisely what the Swedes were doing to me in 2019 and complained about for two years — except these are doing it with love, which is worse.

And the other thing, which goes here and not on a stage.

I am now the person who fills the room, which means I am the person the young ones have to get past, which means somewhere in this city tonight there is a woman of twenty-six in a back room doing four minutes about me.

I hope she is good. I have thought about it a great deal and I mean it and I checked.

14.

And it has never once happened in front of a camera.

Thirteen years. Not once. Not a professional camera, not a phone on a table, not a phone in a pocket.

I now work almost exclusively in rooms that are being filmed.

I am not going to write any more about that this year.

15.

LOS ANGELES · Venice · 11 January

Still on Brooks Avenue. Same room, same window that does not close properly, same landlord who has now told me about the building's energy eleven times.

I could buy a house in the hills. I have been sent four of them by a woman whose job is apparently to send me houses.

I have lived in this room for six years and it is fifteen minutes from the boardwalk and the boardwalk is the only part of this city I understand, and I am not leaving it to go and be lonely somewhere with a view.

On what an American room does to you over eighteen months, which nobody in Tehran will believe.

They love you before you start. That is the whole of the problem and it does not sound like a problem.

The first four seconds are free. They are applauding a decision they made at home in front of a screen and they brought it into the room with them, and it is warm and it is generous and it is **not a response to anything you have done.**

And every instinct I have — seventeen years of them, built in basements where forty people gave you nothing and made you earn it — every one of those instincts is calibrated for a room that starts

at zero.

I have had to learn to start at plus four and go up, which is a different trade, and I was bad at it for most of a year, and the reviews during that year were the best of my life.

The show in New York, since everybody asks and I have never once answered honestly.

Five minutes and forty seconds. Live. On a Saturday. Cue cards, a band, a floor manager counting me in with his hand.

Here is the honest part: **I have no idea whether it went well.**

I know what the tape says. The tape says it went very well. The tape is not evidence — a room that is being filmed on that programme has been trained for fifty years to produce a specific sound at a specific moment and it produces it whether or not anything has occurred, and I could hear the training in it, and I have been reading rooms since I was twenty-six and I could not read that one at all.

I came off and a very kind person told me I had killed, and I said thank you, and I went and stood in a corridor for eleven minutes and could not have told you one true thing about what had just happened.

It is the most successful five minutes of my professional life and it is the only five minutes I have no memory of experiencing.

Which is a sentence I have written before, about something else entirely, thirteen years ago, and I did not notice until I read this page back in April.

16.

Westwood twice this year. Both times for a relative of somebody else's.

There is a version of my career where I am the great Iranian comic of Los Angeles and I do the community rooms and the Nowruz galas and I am beloved by four hundred thousand people who understand every word.

That version is available. It has been available since the month I arrived. It pays extremely well.

I have declined it eleven times and I am not going to write down why, because I have tried four times and every version of it sounds like contempt and it is not contempt.

17.

Darya says it is because I do not want to be anybody's daughter.

She said that in a car, obviously, at one in the morning, and then said *and I would like it noted that I workshopped that on the drive over, so please react accordingly.*

18.

On Darya, since she is going to be in this notebook a great deal more than she has been.

Thirty-five. Eleven years of open mics before I ever met her and six since, which is seventeen, which is one more than me, and she has never once mentioned that and I checked the arithmetic myself.

She is not the biggest name in this city and she is, by some distance, the best technician in it. Everybody in the business knows this. The public does not, and it has stopped bothering her, and I have watched it stop, and it took about two years.

Her note on the phone is at eleven hundred entries now. It is still called Filth. It is still organised by category and still backed up in two places, and last spring she added a tag system, which she explained to me for nineteen minutes in a Denny's at four in the morning with real passion.

19.

The thing I have never written down about her, in six years, is that she is the only person in this country who has never once asked me about Iran.

Not out of delicacy. She asked me, in the first month, whether I wanted to talk about it, and I said not really, and she said

understood, and in six years she has not raised it again.

Six years. In a city where a stranger at a party will ask me about the government before they ask my name.

20.

The rate has done something my mother describes as *shameless*.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the translator which language he
dreamed in. He said, I do not dream, I am always
working.*

21.

I have thirty-one of them now and I have started to see what they have in common, and it is not what I assumed.

I assumed the unwritten ones would be the cruel ones. They are not cruel. Four of them are the warmest things I have ever written and one of them is about my mother and would make her cry, and I do not mean from laughing, and I have not decided what to do with it.

What they have in common is that they are about one person and could not be about anybody else.

That is the whole of it. That is the entire distinction I have been enforcing for forty years without ever stating it correctly. Not cruel and kind. **General and particular.**

Everything I have sold in four decades has been built so that four hundred thousand people could put themselves in it. That is what makes a thing travel and travelling is the trade.

These do not travel. They fit one person, the way a key fits, and they are useless to anybody else, and that is exactly why they are better.

22.

Which means I have spent my working life manufacturing the second-best kind on purpose, and calling the first kind a breach of manners.

from the Delgoshā

*The physician kept a second book of the remedies
he had not given, and it was thicker than the first,
and his students burned it as an embarrassment.*

23.

Friday. He is ninety-four. He read every page to the bottom and back to check something in the middle and then to the bottom again, and squared them, and said this is good work.

Forty-four years.

I did not bring him the new ones. I brought the ordinary material, the way I have every Friday since 2001, and the notebook stayed in the flat, and I have thought about that a great deal since and I cannot reconstruct why.

At the door he held my arm above the elbow.

Four places.

24.

He died on the third of Aban.

25.

My mother telephoned at twenty past six in the morning and said: **Manuchehr, your father has gone.**

Then she said: have you eaten.

I said no.

She said: eat something, and then come.

26.

It was not sudden and it was not long. He went to bed and did not get up and there was about four hours in the middle where a doctor was in the flat and he was awake for some of it and did not say anything of note to anybody, which is exactly right and which I want recorded, because there is going to be a version of this in the family within about a year in which he said something.

He said nothing. He was ninety-four and he had said everything he intended to say by about 2010.

27.

I have written four hundred thousand jokes and I am going to write down what actually happens, because nobody does, and because if I do not do it now I will do it in six months and it will be shaped.

Nothing happens. That is what happens.

You are handed the arrangements. There are a very great number of arrangements and they start immediately and they are the reason nobody in this country goes mad in the first week — a form, a permit, a man to telephone, a number, a car, a place, a time, and every one of them is somebody's job and every one of them has to be done today.

And I did all of it, competently, for four days, and at no point in those four days did I have a single feeling about my father.

I had one on the ninth day, in a queue at a bank, about something else entirely.

28.

Behesht-e Zahra. There is no parking.

I have written that line. I sold it in 2030 and it went to four provinces and it has been said back to me by strangers eleven times and it is in the mouth of a man on television who thinks he wrote it.

I wrote it about Mr Sarabi from the fourth floor and it was true then and it was true on the third of Aban and it is the single most useful thing I have ever made, and standing in that car park I thought: **good, that still works**, and then went and buried my father.

29.

I do not know what that is. I have thought about it for four months. I have decided it is not coldness, and I have decided that on insufficient evidence, and I am leaving it.

from the Delgoshā

*The mourner was praised for his composure. He
said, I am not composed. I am counting the chairs,
because somebody has to, and it was going to be
me, and it is easier than the other thing.*

II. THE LOG

30.

There was a notebook.

My mother gave it to me on the eleventh day, in the kitchen, without ceremony, the way she hands you a bag of something for the journey. She said: this was upstairs.

I said what is it.

She said: I don't know, I never read it, it's his.

And then she went back to the rice, and I want to record that she has not asked me one question about it since, in four months, which I understood at the time as incuriosity and which I now understand as the most disciplined act of restraint I have ever witnessed.

31.

Four hundred and eleven pages. Hardbound, the cheap kind, the same kind for sixty years, and there are nine of them and this is the ninth.

The hand is the hand I have known since I was four. It does not deteriorate until about page three hundred and eighty.

32.

The first two-thirds are me.

Every Friday, for forty-four years, after I left, he copied out the pieces he had just read.

By hand. All of them. Not a selection — the lot. Something in the order of nine or eleven thousand pieces of material, transcribed by a man in his sixties and seventies and eighties and nineties, in the evening, upstairs, after his son had gone home.

33.

And then he worked on them.

Underneath each one, in the smaller hand he used for measurements, there are notes.

They are not appreciations. He is not saying what he liked. **He is trying to find the mechanism.**

He has numbered the parts. On some of them he has drawn what I can only describe as a diagram — a bracket over a phrase, an arrow, a query in the margin. He has, on at least two hundred occasions across four decades, written out an alternative version of the last line and then crossed it out.

34.

He was reverse-engineering it.

For forty-four years, alone, upstairs, with no instrument and no training and no organ, a man who could not detect the effect was methodically taking apart the machine that produced it.

The way he takes apart a scale.

35.

I know I am missing it. I do not know what it is that I am missing.

He said that to me in a car on the Karaj road in about 2013, apropos of nothing, and then said nothing else for eleven minutes.

I have thought about that sentence for twenty-two years and I have never once, not for a second, considered the possibility that **he had been working on it that night and every night, and that the sentence was a status report.**

36.

He never got it.

I have been through all four hundred pages eleven times and I can tell you with confidence that in forty-four years he did not arrive at it. The notes are rigorous and they are wrong. He keeps looking for the mechanism in the wrong place — in the arrangement of the words, in the count of the syllables, in the position of the turn — which is where it looks like it is, and where anybody sensible would look.

It is not there. It is in the difference between what the room is expecting and what arrives, and that is not a property of the sentence, it is a property of two things at once, and one of them is not in the room with you when you write it.

You cannot find it by taking the sentence apart, and he took the sentence apart for forty-four years.

37.

And on some of them he was extremely close.

There is a note from 1998, under a piece I do not remember writing, which reads:

The effect does not appear to be in the line. I have removed the line and asked H. to read only what came before it, and she laughed anyway, in the correct place, at nothing. Therefore the line is not the cause. The line is the permission.

He is two-thirds of the way to it and he does not know that is what he has done, and he never returns to it. It is not mentioned again in three hundred pages.

38.

H. is my mother.

He was running experiments on my mother in 2018 in his own kitchen and neither of them ever mentioned it to me.

39.

And then, about a hundred and forty pages in, somewhere in the mid-eighties, it changes.

I read past it three times. It does not look like writing. It looks like the inside of his work bag — a date, a place, a number, a line ruled off.

It is a log.

40.

Sign at the stop states a bus every ten minutes. Waited forty-one times over four months. Mean interval nineteen minutes, longest thirty-four. The sign is not wrong. It is aspirational.

41.

Bakery on the corner. Scale under by 40 g at 2 kg. Told him in 2014. Eleven years. He has not repaired it and he has not raised his prices, so the loaf costs what it costs and weighs what it weighs. I have decided this is honest.

42.

Ministry lift out of service. Notice states temporary. Notice has been in place six years. I have measured the dust on the notice.

43.

Mosque has installed a new sound system at a cost I was told twice and do not believe. It is extremely loud. That is the whole of the improvement. They have solved the wrong problem beautifully.

44.

There are nine hundred of them.

Sixty years. Four or five a week. Dated, numbered, ruled off, in the format he used for certificates, kept in a hardbound book upstairs by a man who believed he was doing bookkeeping.

45.

It is the funniest document I have ever read.

I want to be precise about that because I am aware of what I am, and of the circumstances, and of the fact that a man who has just buried his father is not a reliable instrument.

I have read it eleven times. I have read it sober at eleven in the morning. I have read four of them aloud to Roshanak on a telephone across nine time zones and had to stop.

It is the best comic writing I have encountered in this language in thirty-eight years and it was made by somebody who did not know that funny was a thing.

More of them, because I am going to go on copying them out until I have got through all nine hundred, and because this is now the only thing I do in the afternoons.

Taxi from Enghelab. Driver states the fare has gone up because of the price of parts. I asked which part. He did not have one in mind. I paid it. The reasoning was false and the fare was correct.

Neighbour has been extending his flat for nine years. Notice of works displayed, dated 1385. I have photographed the notice annually. This is the ninth photograph.

Committee on the price of bread reported in the spring as promised. I have obtained the report. It is forty-one pages and does not contain a price.

Doctor's waiting room states appointments are every fifteen minutes. Counted over four visits. Mean eight minutes. He is therefore twice as good as he claims and half as careful, and both of these are in the same number.

Man at the bazaar sells four grades of saffron at four prices. I bought all four and weighed them and they are the same saffron. I have not told him. He is eighty and it is not my business and the price is the price.

Shop on Amir Kabir. Sign says established 1342. He was born in 1349. I have decided not to raise it.

Lift at the ministry repaired. Six years. I went to look. It is repaired. I have no further entry.

That last one is four words long and it is the funniest thing in four hundred pages and I have read it perhaps eighty times.

I have no further entry.

Six years of measuring the dust on a notice and the thing is fixed and there is nothing left to observe and he simply stops, in writing, in a hardbound book, and rules a line underneath.

There is no relief in it and no triumph and no joke, and the absence of all three is the joke, and he would not have understood a single word of this paragraph.

46.

And it does not work by any method I have ever used or could have invented.

I subtract. I find the last word and reverse out of it and cut until the thing breaks, and everything I have ever built has that shape.

Roshanak accumulates. She lays one specific object beside another and keeps going past the point at which a professional would close it, and around the sixth the room gives way under the weight.

My father verifies.

He states the claim. He states the measurement. He stops.

There is no turn. There is no last word. There is no escalation and no exit and no permission — **he never once wrote a punchline, because he did not know there was such a thing to write.**

The joke is the arithmetic. The claim says ten minutes. The number says nineteen. He puts them next to each other and rules a line underneath and goes to bed.

47.

The sign is not wrong. It is aspirational.

That is a perfect sentence and he did not know he had written it. He thought he was being accurate. **He was being accurate,** and the accuracy is the joke, and there is no gap between those two things in that notebook anywhere.

48.

I have spent thirty-eight years and four hundred thousand attempts trying to produce in a stranger's body an event which that man produced four times a week for sixty years while looking for a fault in a scale, and which he could not perceive, and which he recorded in the wrong column.

49.

And the last page.

I am going to describe it and then I am going to stop for the night.

At the top, in the hand from about 1990, are nine words. They are the nine words I said in a scrapyard off the Khavaran road in Mordad 1368 when I was nine years old and he laughed until he had to sit down on an oil drum.

He has copied them out.

And underneath them, going down the page, are thirty-five years of attempts to work out why.

Different pens. Different decades. The hand getting worse. Some of them are two words long. One of them is a diagram. One of them, from what I would guess is the late nineties, is the single sentence *possibly because it was not intended*, and it is crossed out.

The last entry on the page is in the hand from the final year and it is very shaky and it says:

Still do not know. Will ask M. if there is time.

He did not ask me.

I was in that flat every Friday for the whole of that year and he did not ask me, and I do not know whether that is because there was not time or because he had decided it was not his place, and both of those are him, and I am not going to find out.

from the Delgoshā

*The astronomer left four hundred pages of
observations and no conclusion, and the academy
said he had failed, and a man from another country
read them eleven years later and was made famous
by them, and the academy claimed him.*

The last thing about the log, which I have been saving.

There is no entry about my father anywhere in it.

Nine hundred observations across sixty years — the bus, the bread, the lift, the sound system, four hundred pages of his son, thirty scattered notes about his wife — and **not one line about himself.**

Not a complaint. Not a preference. Not a date he was tired or a year that was difficult. Nothing about the shop, nothing about selling it, nothing about the war, nothing about the day in 2027, nothing about the son who did not come back.

I went through it four times looking. It is not there.

He kept a sixty-year record of the discrepancy between what things claim and what they are, and he never once turned it on himself.

And I do not think that was modesty or avoidance. I have thought about it since Aban and I have arrived somewhere else.

I think he did not consider himself a claim.

A sign claims ten minutes. A scale claims two kilos. A notice claims temporary. Those are assertions and an assertion can be checked and somebody has to do it.

He never said anything about himself at all, in ninety-four years, to anybody — **so there was nothing to verify.** No claim, no discrepancy, no entry. The instrument found nothing because he had never given it anything to find.

And I have built a life on precisely the same principle and called it a trade, and have a machine downstairs selling it to four hundred thousand people at eleven dollars a month.

50.

LOS ANGELES · Venice · the night of the third of Aban

It was about eight in the evening here.

I could not come. I want that written down flatly at the top of this entry, before I say anything else about the week, because I have

caught myself twice now beginning it with the reasons.

I could not come. Mid-tour, eleven dates, and a status question that my lawyer described as *probably fine* in a tone I have learned to hear properly, and I did not risk it.

He said it was fine. I said it was fine. Neither of us is an idiot.

51.

So I wrote something instead, at four in the morning, badly, in Persian, and it was read out at the memorial by a cousin of his I have never met.

I am going to put it here because it is mine and because I have a feeling I am going to want it.

52.

Manuchehr jan.

I have been sitting here for two hours trying to write something appropriate and everything appropriate is a lie, so here is what I have actually been thinking about, which is the summers.

You were seven and he took you round with him because your mother had somewhere to be. Scrapyards. Poultry places. A bakery in the heat. You have told me that story eleven times and every single time you tell it like it was a chore, and every single time you are smiling while you do it and you do not know you are doing it.

And I keep thinking: you were Pesar Khaleh.

You were literally Pesar Khaleh. Little bald working child in a hat being carried round after a grown man, asking what everything was, and being told, and not understanding, and being told again.

And the thing about Pesar Khaleh — I looked this up years ago and I have never got over it — is that he is not anybody's cousin. That is just his name. The woman who made him said

so. It is a name for a relationship he does not have, and nobody on that programme has ever once mentioned it to him, and he has been going round for thirty years being called somebody's cousin by people who are not related to him at all.

I am not going to explain why I am telling you this because you will get there before I finish the sentence and you always do.

I am so sorry I cannot come. I am so sorry.

Have you eaten. I know what I sound like. I have become your mother, which is the single worst thing that has happened to me this decade.

53.

He did not reply for nine days.

Then he sent: *thank you for the letter.*

Four words.

I sat on the floor of my flat in Venice and laughed until I had to put the telephone down, because it took me about four seconds to understand what he had done and I do not think he did it on purpose, and if you have to explain it then it does not work, and there is nobody in this country I could explain it to.

III. THIS IS GOOD WORK

54.

I gave the address at the tarhim.

I want to record, before anything else, that this is the first time in sixty-five years that my own words have come out of my own mouth in a room with people in it.

I have written for other people's mouths since 1987. Three men on television, a channel with two million, four hundred rooms, a woman in Los Angeles who fills arenas. Thirty-eight years and I have never once been in the building when it landed.

A son speaking at his father's tarhim is not a performance. It is an obligation, and an obligation is not a claim, and I have checked this from four directions and it holds.

55.

It ran twenty-six minutes. Four hundred people, the hall on the corner, the men in one room and the women through the door and the chairs with the backs on them in the room I was standing in, which I did not mention, because my father would have measured them and I am not my father.

Here is what I said.

56.

Every Friday for forty-four years I brought my father the new pages.

He put on the glasses. He read every line, to the bottom, and then back to check something in the middle, and then to the bottom again, and nobody in that flat talked while he was doing it, including my mother, which those of you who know my mother will understand is the most remarkable thing I am going to tell you this afternoon.

And then he squared the pages on the arm of the chair and said: **this is good work.**

Four words.

Forty-four years. Something like a quarter of a million pages. Four words, every week, without variation, and in all that time he never once said which part.

I want to be clear that this was not coldness, because half of you are being tactful about it and the other half have already said something to each other in the car.

I have had eleven agents, three men on television and a considerable number of strangers tell me that I am a genius. I have not believed one of them for four consecutive seconds.

I believed those four words every week for forty-four years and I never once asked myself why.

He had no sense of humour.

That is the second thing everyone in this hall is being tactful about and I would like to release you all from it.

He did not have the organ. It was absent, the way some people cannot smell. He was not solemn — he was the warmest man I have ever met, and he is the only person who ever came to my flat at two in the morning, and he came in his own car — he simply could not detect the thing.

He told me so himself, in a car, on the Karaj road, in about 2013, with no preamble whatsoever.

I know I am missing it. I do not know what it is that I am missing.

And then he said nothing else for eleven minutes, because he had said the thing, and in his view the thing had now been said.

Four seconds and the hall goes, and my mother goes first and takes the room with her, and I had to stop, and I have thought since about the fact that I did not plan the stop and could not have.

Let me tell you about the bread.

The bakery on the corner — the one most of you use — has a scale that has been running forty grams light at two kilos

since before some of you were born. My father established this in 2014 and told the man once, quietly, in the shop, and never mentioned it again, and went on buying that bread for thirty-one years.

And when I was about thirty, and pleased with myself, I asked him why he had not made a fuss.

He said the man had not repaired it and had not raised his prices, so the loaf costs what it costs and weighs what it weighs.

And he said: I have decided this is honest.

I have spent thirty-eight years in a line of work that consists entirely of the gap between what a thing says it is and what a thing is. My father settled that question standing in a bakery in 2014 holding a bag of bread, told nobody, and went home.

He assessed everything. Everything. If you had him in your house he assessed it and if he liked you he told you and if he did not know you he did not.

The tyres on a taxi. A shelf four degrees out of true, which he would look at three times and not mention. The new sound system at this mosque, about which he said — and I am quoting, in this building, at his funeral, and he would want it accurate —

It is very loud. That is the whole of the improvement. They have solved the wrong problem beautifully.

Eleven seconds. Haj Agha in the second row with his hand over his face. My mother again, first, and she does not attempt to conceal it, and she is ninety-two and she has buried a husband four days ago and she is laughing in the front row of the women's section and I could hear her through a door.

He was told at every birthday since 1994 that he looked well.

His position on this, stated once, at ninety: **it is the only compliment that improves as the evidence deteriorates.**

Now.

He took me round with him in the summers. Every school holiday from when I was about seven, because my mother had somewhere to be, and I have described this to people for fifty years as a chore.

Sixty jobs a summer. A tin cup and a thermos and the back of a Paykan that had no air in it. Scrapyards off the Khavaran road, poultry wholesalers, bakeries, a dairy in Shahr-e Rey with a floor you could not stand on.

And at every single one of them he opened a wooden case with eleven brass weights in it, in ascending order, in green felt, and explained to a child of seven the entire chain of certification. That these are checked against heavier ones, and those against a national standard, and that against a mass kept in a vault in France. So that a kilogram here is a kilogram there.

He explained it to me perhaps forty times.

He did not remember explaining it once. He explained it the way other men ask after your health.

He thought he was minding me.

He was training me, and neither of us found out for fifty-eight years.

There is a notebook.

I found it eleven days ago. Nobody knew about it, including my mother, and I am going to read you four lines from it, and I want to say clearly that I have no permission to do this, and that he would have disliked it very much, and that I am doing it anyway because he is not here to be unanswerably correct at me about it.

And I read them the bus, and the bakery, and the lift with the dust measured on the notice, and the sound system, which they had already had once and which was better the second time because they now knew where it came from.

Four hundred people at a tarhim, in black, four days after a burial, laughing at bookkeeping.

It went on for some time. It went on long enough that I stood at the front and did nothing, which is a thing I have watched other people do for thirty-eight years from four rows back with a stopwatch, and which I had never once done, and which is not like anything.

That is my father.

Nine hundred of them. Sixty years. Four or five a week, dated and numbered and ruled off, in a hardbound book upstairs, in the format he used for certificates, kept by a man who believed he was keeping records.

He never wrote a punchline in his life, because he did not know there was such a thing to write. He stated the claim, he stated the measurement, and he stopped.

He was the funniest man I have ever met and he died without knowing what funny was.

And that is where the room went quiet, and it was not a silence I built and it is not one I could have built, and I have been doing this for thirty-eight years.

In Mordad 1368 he took me to a scrapyard off the Khavaran road because my mother had somewhere to be.

I have told this story for thirty-eight years and I have had two-thirds of it for the whole of that time. I got the rest of it from him in Farvardin, in a scrapyard, at ninety-two, while he was laying out the fourth weight, and it took him about ninety seconds and he did not stop working.

He had already done two jobs that morning and both scales were wrong. One over, one under. And the second man had argued with him about it for twenty minutes with the book open on the counter.

And he had begun, on the drive out, to doubt himself.

Two false readings in one morning is not a coincidence. If his own weights had drifted — if the case was wrong — then every reading he had taken in eleven years was worthless. He had started making a list of the premises he would have to go back to.

He was fifty-six years old and he had never had a day like it, before or since, and he told me so in Farvardin with a two-hundred-gram weight in his hand.

So he knelt down in a scrapyard in forty-three degrees and opened that case expecting to find out that the only thing he had ever been certain of had a crack in it.

And a boy of nine, who had been brought along because there was nowhere else to put him, looked at the weights coming out of the felt in ascending order and said:

That one is a kilo everywhere in the world.

He laughed until he had to sit down on an oil drum.

He had the two-hundred in his hand and he put it down on the lid because he could not hold it. It went on for the better part of a minute.

I have never heard that sound before or since. Not from him. Not from anybody — and I have been in this trade for thirty-eight years and I have heard a very great deal of laughing.

And in the car afterwards I asked him what had been funny.

And he said **I don't know.**

And that was true. He told me so in Farvardin. He knew what had happened. He did not know that it was funny. Something had gone through him and there was no word available to him for it except one he had never had a use for.

The last page of that notebook has those nine words copied out at the top.

And underneath them, going down the page, in different pens, across thirty-five years, with the handwriting getting worse, are his attempts to work out why.

The final entry is from this year and it is very shaky and it says: **still do not know. Will ask M. if there is time.**

He did not ask me.

I was in that flat every Friday of this year.

Baba.

You read every page. You never asked what it was for, and you never asked whether it paid, and you never once asked why there was no name on any of it.

I have decided this week that you did not ask because you had worked it out, and that you decided not to make me say it out loud.

I have been telling myself for thirty-eight years that I do it this way because a sentence with no sender cannot be prosecuted.

I found your notebook eleven days ago.

Sixty years of it. Upstairs. In your own hand. With nobody's name on it.

I got it from you. I got all of it from you. I have spent my life arranging for my work to belong to nobody and I learned how in the back of a Paykan on the Khavaran road from a man who did exactly the same thing for sixty years and called it bookkeeping.

That is the only thing either of us ever made, and neither of us signed it.

Thank you for the Fridays.

This is good work.

On the three repeated lines in this notebook, which I have noticed and am leaving.

I have quoted my father three times in two places — once out of the log and once out of my own mouth in a hall in front of four hundred people.

The sound system. The thing he was missing. The improvement.

I have gone back and forth about tidying that and I am not going to, and the reason is that **it is the only thing in eight notebooks that has ever happened twice on purpose.**

Everything else in here occurred once and was written down once. That is what a notebook is for and it is what I have been doing since I was ten.

Those three sentences he said, and then I said, and now four hundred people have said them to each other in cars on the way home, and somebody in that hall is going to say the one about the sound system at a gathering in about four years and will not be able to say where it came from.

That is the entire trade, performed on my father, by me, at his funeral, and I did not plan it and I could not have.

57.

There is no marginalia on that one.

I have set down four speeches in these notebooks over eighteen years and I have annotated every one of them — the laughs to the half second, the second the provost's pen stopped, the man who converted it into a cough.

I was in the room for this one and I counted nothing.

I have thought about why and the answer is not moving. It is simply that **the instrument does not run when I am the one standing up.** It never has. It is built to watch a room I am not in, and I was in it, and it did not come on, and I have no record of the only afternoon of my life I would have wanted one from.

58.

My mother laughed four times and was first on three of them.

I want to describe the first one properly because it is the reason the afternoon worked and because I have thought about almost nothing else since.

It came at the neck — at *he had no sense of humour*, which I had written as a release and placed where a release goes, and which in a room of four hundred people four days after a burial is a thing you offer and do not expect to be taken up.

Four hundred people in black were waiting for permission and none of them was going to be the one.

And my mother, in the front row of the women's section, through a door, at ninety-two, in the fourth day of the worst week of her life, went first.

Properly. Out loud. Not a laugh she let out — one that got away, and then one she did not attempt to conceal, and the second one was louder than the first.

And the hall went behind her inside a second and a half.

I have spent thirty-eight years building permission into material — that is the whole of the craft and I could give you a lecture on it — and I have never in my life seen it done by a person, in a room, from a chair, without a word.

She has authority in that community that I do not fully understand and have never asked about. She is ninety-two and she buried him on Tuesday and she does not care, and everybody in that building knew that if she was laughing then it was allowed.

She opened the room. I only wrote the thing.

And there is the other part, which I did not get until Dey.

That sound — that specific sound, my mother going first — is the one my father spent sixty-one years documenting.

Nine hundred entries. Thirty scattered notes about her, timed, measured, with the pauses recorded and the mechanism attempted. *Four minutes forty. She stopped twice for no reason I could identify and both stops were necessary.*

And there is not one line anywhere in four hundred pages describing what she sounds like when she laughs.

He had a unit for everything. Grams, minutes, percent, years, the count of the Fridays.

He never found one for that, and so he never wrote it down, and it is the single thing he was closest to for the longest and the only thing in his life he left no record of.

IV. THE FOURTH PLACE

from the Delgoshā

*They asked which of the two brothers was the wit.
The mother said, neither, and went on cooking, and
the guests agreed with her, and she had answered
a different question.*

59.

I am sixty-five years old and I have been getting my mother wrong since I was nine.

60.

The account I have held since childhood, which is in all seven of these notebooks, is this: she is funny by accident. She describes a thing accurately at the wrong moment and the room goes, and she has never told a joke in her life, and she does not know she is doing it.

Every clause of that is wrong.

61.

There is an entry in my father's notebook dated 2016. It is nine words.

M. believes his mother is funny by accident. I have not corrected him.

And underneath, in the smaller hand:

It is not my place and he will find out.

He was carrying that for twenty-nine years.

62.

And once I had that, I went through the log again looking for her, and she is all over it.

She has been right about the Ranjbars for nineteen years. I have kept a record. She does not know I have kept a record.

Told the story about her sister's husband at a gathering of eleven. I timed it. Four minutes forty. She stopped twice for no reason I could identify and both stops were necessary. I have thought about this for some weeks.

H. does not begin at the beginning. She begins at the fourth thing and lets you work backwards, and by the time you have caught up you are already in it. I have tried this twice at the shop and it does

not work when I do it.

He tried it. At the shop. In front of customers. A man with no sense of humour attempting his wife's technique on a poultry wholesaler, and reporting the failure in a notebook, in the format he used for certificates.

63.

She knows exactly what she is doing.

She has known since before I was born. She has been landing material on a room for seventy years with a delivery so slow and so apparently artless that nobody has ever caught her at it, **including a professional, in the room, weekly, for six decades.**

It is the best-concealed technique I have ever encountered and the concealment is not part of the act. **She has simply never once needed anybody to know.**

I built a name out of two halves and gave eleven years of work away for nothing and constructed an entire apparatus so that I would not have to be credited.

She managed it by not minding.

64.

And the mouth.

I have been sanitising my mother in my own notebooks since 2010 and I did not know I was doing it until the second week of Azar.

I went back through seven of these and looked at every place I have quoted her. **There are two hundred and eleven of them and I have cleaned up every single one.**

Not once or twice. Systematically. For thirty-five years.

She does not talk like that. She has never talked like that. She swears the way other people season food — not much, precisely where it is needed, and you notice immediately if it is absent — and it arrives at conversational volume in the middle of a sentence about the price of aubergines, from a woman of ninety-two in a

headscarf, and **the gap between the delivery and the content is the entire mechanism.**

I have been removing the mechanism for thirty-five years and writing down the residue and calling it my mother.

65.

The cleaned versions are worse. Obviously they are worse. I have put four of them side by side with what she actually said, as best I can reconstruct it, and it is not close.

I have been editing the funniest person I know, downward, in private, for three and a half decades, out of an instinct I cannot name and do not like the look of.

66.

She has never sworn in front of my father.

Not once. In sixty-one years.

I checked with four relatives because I did not believe it, and all four said the same thing without hesitating, and two of them laughed at me for asking.

from the Delgoshā

The scribe corrected the queen's grammar in every letter for thirty years, and when he died the letters that followed were read with astonishment, and the court said she had improved.

67.

She organised the funeral.

Four hundred people, six days, at ninety-two, four days after burying a man she had been married to for sixty-one years, and I want to describe what that actually looked like because I have spent this notebook so far on what she is like and not on what she is.

She decided who was fed and in what order. She decided which of my father's cousins was told in person and which was told by telephone, and she was correct about all of them, including two I would have got wrong. She knew the hall's caterer had put the wrong thing in the boxes in 2039 and she telephoned him about it before she telephoned her sister.

She did not sit down for six days.

She was, in the most precise sense available to me, the most competent person in the building, and she has been running a household through a revolution, a war, four currencies and two sons for seventy years, and none of that has anything to do with being funny.

68.

And she is not performing the widow, and she is slightly impatient with the people who would like her to.

She said one thing about sixty-one years, once, on the second day, to me, in the kitchen, while doing something else:

He was the only person I have ever met who did not want anything from me.

Then she asked whether the boxes had gone out.

69.

LOS ANGELES · Venice · 4 February

I have not written in this thing since Aban and I am going to now, because something happened in December and I have been circling

it for two months and Manu is four thousand kilometres away and I cannot say any of this to anybody in this city except one person and she is the subject.

What she does that nobody sees, and I only saw it because I was standing in the wrong place.

Second day. The hall, the boxes, four hundred names, her sister, two cousins she does not like and one she cannot stand.

And a woman came in — sixties, nobody I knew — and stood in the doorway of the women's room and could not come further, and my mother crossed that room at ninety-two, took her by both arms, walked her to a chair, sat her in it, sat down beside her, and said nothing at all for about four minutes.

Then she got up and went back to the boxes.

I asked afterwards who it was.

She said: her son died in 2029. She has not been to one of these since.

I said: I didn't know you knew her.

And my mother said: I don't.

That is the whole of her and it is not funny and it does not go in the act and I have thought about it every week since Aban.

She has been doing that for seventy years in a language with no vocabulary, in a country that has given her a great deal of opportunity to practise, and there is no record of any of it anywhere, and when she goes there will be four hundred people who cannot tell you one specific thing and all of whom will say the same word.

And I will have three plates on a table and a rice bag on a wardrobe.

70.

The Wiltern, the eleventh of December. Sixteen hundred. The best I have ever been.

I do not say that. I have been doing this for seventeen years and I have said *that was good* perhaps four times. This was the best I have ever been and I knew it at minute nine and I knew it coming off and I know it now with two months on it.

Not the twelfth minute. **The twelfth minute has not come in thirteen years and it did not come that night** and I want that on the page immediately so that nobody, including me, tries to make this into a story about that.

It was just an extraordinary hour, done entirely by me, with all of me present for it, which is the other kind and which I have stopped pretending is a consolation prize.

71.

Darya opened. Twenty-two minutes and she destroyed them, and I went on after her and had to work, and I have never been more pleased about anything.

72.

Afterwards there were people, and then fewer people, and then a flat in Mar Vista that belongs to somebody neither of us knows well, and then about eleven of us, and then four, and then two.

We took something. I am going to name it because this notebook has never once been coy and I am not starting at thirty-five: molly, both of us, about one in the morning, from a person we both trust, which is the only part of that sentence I am prepared to be smug about.

73.

And here is the thing I have been circling for two months.

Everything we said to each other that night was true. I have checked.

I know precisely what that drug does. It is not a truth serum and it does not reveal anything — it removes the tax. It takes away the part of you that computes the cost of saying a thing before you say

it, and what is left says it, and in the morning you find out whether the thing was there all along or whether the chemistry wrote it.

I have watched people find out the second one. I have watched a man in Malmö tell a woman he loved her on a Saturday and avoid her for a year.

So I got up on the twelfth of December, in her flat, on a sofa, at eleven in the morning, feeling like a bag of gravel, and I did what I have done since I was seventeen with every single thing anybody has ever given me.

I took it apart to see whether it held.

74.

It held.

Six years. It has been six years. She knew before I did, by about eighteen months, and she never once made it my problem, and she never once made a move on a woman who had not worked out yet that she was one — which is a decency I did not have the vocabulary to notice at the time and I have the vocabulary now.

I have known I was since I was about nineteen, in Tehran, where it was a fact I handled the way you handle any other fact there, which is by handling it. I have never once said it out loud on a stage. I have been asked four times by people whose job is to ask and I have said no, and I will go on saying no, **because the moment I say it in this country it becomes the subject, and I have already spent two years being a voice from Iran and I am not doing another decade as something else.**

That is not a closet. That is a professional decision about billing, and if anybody wants to argue about it they can come and find me in Venice.

75.

We told each other. Properly, in order, at length, in a flat in Mar Vista at three in the morning, in that state, and both of us knowing exactly what the state was and saying so out loud and going on

anyway.

And then we went to bed, and I am not going to write about it, because I have written about my own body for money for seventeen years and there is precisely one thing I have ever kept and this is it.

76.

She made me tea in the morning. It was terrible. She is the daughter of two attorneys and she cannot make tea and I have decided to let that develop over time.

77.

And the thing I keep coming back to, two months on:

Nothing about my life has changed and everything about it is different, and I cannot write the joke, and I have tried eleven times, and every version is either coy or a confession and I do not want either.

I have four minutes on my own marriage material that has been in the act since Stockholm and it still works and it is still true and I am not taking it out.

78.

I have not told Manu.

Not because he would mind. He would not mind, and he would say something short and exactly right, and that is precisely the problem — **I want it for myself for a while before it becomes something somebody else is kind about.**

He has just buried his father. He is sixty-five and sitting in a chair in Tehran reading four hundred pages of a dead man's handwriting.

It can wait until spring.

from the Delgoshā

*Two travellers agreed to say nothing until the city
gate and arrived having understood each other
entirely, and at the gate spoke, and were then
obliged to begin again.*

On Darya, six months on, since this notebook has never been coy.

Nothing has changed and that is the entire report.

She still does the Tuesday room in Studio City for nothing. She still has eleven hundred entries on her phone and she still workshops her swearing, and she has started doing it in Persian now, badly, with the stress in the wrong place, deliberately, because she found out in March that it makes me put things down.

She still cannot make tea. I have shown her four times. She listens with total attention, asks two good questions, and then does something with the water that I cannot describe.

What has changed is smaller and I have only just found the words for it.

For seventeen years I have come off a stage and had nobody to tell.

That is the actual condition of this job and nobody says it, because it sounds like a complaint and there are four thousand people who would like your problem. You do fifty minutes, and it is the most concentrated thing a person can do, and then you are in a corridor, and it is over, and there is nobody in the building who was doing the same thing.

Mahin gave me notes at the back of a hall in Hässelby for four years and they were the best notes I have ever had and she was the audience.

Darya was on the same stage forty minutes earlier.

So when I say the thing about minute nine she already knows what happened at minute nine, because she was standing at the back watching it, because she always is, and she has an opinion, and it is usually better than mine.

That is it. That is the whole of what is different. Somebody was in the building.

And the professional question, which four people have now asked me in a tone.

No. It has not affected the work and it is not going to, and I have thought about it properly rather than defensively.

She opens for me when it suits both of us and she headlines her own rooms when it does not, and she took a booking against me in February at a venue eleven blocks away and did not tell me until afterwards, and when I said why didn't you say she said *because you'd have moved*, and she was right, and I would have.

The one thing I will put down and then close this.

In April I was in Tehran in my head for most of a week — the call, the notebook, the four words — and I was not good company and I said so.

And she did not ask me about it. Not once. For nine days.

On the tenth she left a plate outside the door of the room I was working in and did not knock.

I have not told her where she got that from. She has never met my mother. She has never met his mother. She has been in that house exactly nought times.

It is the house language and she does not know she is speaking it, and I sat on a floor in Venice with a plate I had not asked for and did not want and finished entirely.

79.

She telephoned in Bahman and talked for an hour and eleven minutes and did not once say the thing she was telephoning about.

She described a venue. The rake of the seating, where the bar was, how long the applause went on and what shape it was, and a woman in the fourth row with a laugh like a door.

I have been listening to that woman describe rooms for thirteen years. I know what it sounds like when she is holding something.

I did not ask. I have had a great deal of practice at not asking in this family and for the first time in my life I noticed myself doing it, in real time, on a telephone, and did it anyway.

And the mouth, which I have written about before and which people who have only met her on a screen do not believe.

She does not swear the way I swear. I swear the way a mechanic swears — it arrives, it is punctuation, it is gone. Hers is **filed**.

Eleven hundred entries on a telephone, organised by category, backed up in two places, and every single one of them drafted. She workshops obscenity. She has the entire administrative vocabulary of two attorneys' daughter and she uses the whole of it:

That room can eat my entire ass, itemised, in the order received.

He gave me a note and I want it on the record that I will be responding in writing.

That was not a set. That was a deposition with a two-drink minimum.

I would not urinate on that man if he were on fire and I have thought about the conditional and I stand by it.

It is the first thing I ever noticed about her and it was nine years ago in a corridor in Hollywood, and I have not got over it, and in nine years I have never once beaten her at it and I have stopped trying.

80.

There is going to be a version of that conversation in about four months in which I ask her.

I would like that recorded here, in this hand, on this date, in case there is not.

V. HAVE YOU EATEN

from the Delgoshā

A woman set an extra place at her table for eleven years. The neighbours called it grief. Her husband, who kept accounts, called it a column, and both of them were correct and neither said so.

81.

Friday, the first one after.

I got to the door at the usual time out of forty-four years of habit and stood on the landing for a moment because I could hear that she was already cooking, and then I went in, and the table was laid.

For three.

And then, in Esfand, the wardrobe.

She asked me to move a thing down from the top of it because she is ninety-two and will not use a chair for this and has an arrangement involving a broom handle that I have asked her four times to stop using.

There is a bag up there. Cloth, the kind that had rice in it, tied at the neck.

I brought it down and she said leave it, and I said what is it, and she said **it's mine**, in a tone I have heard perhaps four times in my life and which ends a conversation, and I left it on the bed and went back to the kitchen.

I opened it in Farvardin, when she was at her sister's, and I am not proud of that and I would do it again.

Clippings.

A piece from a newspaper supplement in 2019 about internet humour, with four lines in it attributed to a poet who died in 1367, and one of those lines circled once in pencil.

A print-out, off somebody's telephone, badly cropped, of a museum label from a gallery in Europe with the word on it and nothing underneath.

A photograph of a wall in Narmak taken by somebody who is not her — she has never been to Narmak in her life — with seven words on it in white paint and the last four missing.

Four pages torn out of a magazine about a collective in Berlin. A printed page from an academic journal in English, which she does not read, about an attribution study, with nothing marked on it at all.

Eleven years of it. Perhaps sixty items. **Nothing is labelled and nothing is dated and there is no order to any of it.**

She has been keeping an archive of a son who does not exist.

For eleven years, in a rice bag, on top of a wardrobe, and she has never mentioned it, and she has never asked me one question, and she has never let a single item of it into a conversation.

She does not know the details. She cannot — nobody does. But she is the woman who invented a disease at a school door on no notice and ran it for six years, and she has been paying attention since before I could walk, and she worked out a long time ago that the thing in the newspapers was in some way her son.

And she never asked.

For exactly the reason my father never asked, which he put in writing at some point in the last five years: *he would tell me, and then I would have to know it.*

Two people in one flat, on two floors, for eleven years.

He kept his in a hardbound book upstairs, in his own hand, four hundred pages, with the dates ruled off.

She kept hers in a rice bag on a wardrobe, unlabelled and out of order, made of other people's paper.

Neither of them knew the other was doing it. I am certain of that. I have thought about it for four months and I am certain.

And they were married sixty-one years and they ate at the same table every day of it and they were both, separately, in secret, in their own formats, **keeping a record of a man who has arranged his entire life so that no record exists.**

I put it back in the bag and tied the neck the way it had been tied and put it back on the wardrobe.

It is still there. She has not mentioned it.

I have four hundred pages of my father in a drawer downstairs and sixty pieces of paper in a rice bag upstairs, and between them they are the only evidence on earth that I did any of it, and neither of them was made by me, and neither of them was ever meant to be

read.

82.

She has not stopped laying the fourth place.

She has stopped laying my father's.

83.

I stood in that doorway at sixty-five years of age with a bag of bread in my hand and understood something about my mother without being told, for the first time in my life.

The fourth place was never a vigil. It was never hope and it was never denial and it was never — as an aunt of mine said out loud at the tarhim, to a room — *a mother's heart*.

It is a **record**.

It is kept accurately, in the format available to her, on the same schedule, for eighteen years. *This is who is not here*. And when the reason for a column changes, the column changes, because that is what you do with a record.

My father kept his in a hardbound book upstairs with the dates ruled off.

She has been keeping hers on the table, in front of us, every Friday, for eighteen years, and not one person in that flat has ever read it as anything but grief.

84.

She did not explain it.

I did not ask.

We ate.

85.

And then, in the kitchen, with her back to me, in the middle of something about the Ranjbars' daughter, she said the thing I am going to be carrying for whatever is left.

She said: *nobody in this family has ever known anybody in this family.*

She said: we are very close. We eat together every week. **I could not tell you one thing your father thought that he did not say in front of the whole table.**

She said: and I am not complaining, Manuchehr. I want that clear. It was a good sixty-one years and he was the only person who never wanted anything from me and I would do it again tomorrow.

And then she turned round and said:

I am telling you because you are doing it. And you are doing it worse. And you are doing it to people who are still here.

The first Friday I did not go.

The fourth one after. I had been every week since Aban and on the fourth I did not, and I telephoned instead and said I had something, and I did not have anything.

She said: all right. Have you eaten.

I said yes.

She said no you have not, and then she said — and this is the part — **come Sunday instead, I'll do the thing with the aubergines.**

She rescheduled forty-four years.

In about nine seconds, on a telephone, without one word of comment, because her son could not come on a Friday and Friday was not the point and had never been the point and she was the only person in the family who knew that.

I went on the Sunday. The table was laid for three.

And I want to record what I have worked out since, which took until Khordad.

The Friday was his.

Not the meal — the *reading*. Forty-four years of a man who needed a fixed point in the week at which the pages arrived, because that is how he conducted everything, and my mother built her entire week around a ritual that belonged to somebody else and never once

mentioned that it was not hers.

She has no ritual. She has never had one. She has the thing where you come and she feeds you and it does not matter what day it is, and I have been reading that as her not having a structure for fifty years.

It is not the absence of a structure. **It is a structure with no schedule in it**, which is harder, and which cannot be missed, and which is why in sixty-five years I have never once found her not ready.

86.

And then, still with her back to me, still doing something with the colander, she said the other thing.

She said: *you know it was not because of Payam.*

I said what.

She said: **the name. The no-name. All of it. You were doing it before.** You were doing it at fourteen. You had a notebook at ten that you kept under the thing and you would not let me look at it and I never looked at it, and do not tell me now whether I would have found anything, I do not want to know.

She said: your brother did not make you like this. **Your brother gave you somewhere to put it**, and it was a very good somewhere, and it has lasted eighteen years and it is the best excuse anybody in this family has ever had.

Then she changed the subject.

Entirely, mid-breath, to the Ranjbars' daughter's husband and a thing about a car, and she did not come back to it, and she has not come back to it since, in seven months.

One pass. No second approach. The way you tell somebody there is something on their collar.

I have been turning that over since Esfand and the worst of it is not that she is right.

The worst of it is that she has been sitting on it for **fifty-one years** — since I was fourteen — and she waited until she had buried her husband and my father was not in the room and my brother had been gone eighteen years and I was sixty-five and there was nobody left it could hurt.

She has better timing than I have. She has always had better timing than I have.

87a.

Then she asked whether I had eaten.

87.

I have thought about that for eleven weeks and I have got as far as this.

She is right and she is not describing a fault. She is describing a **language**, and she is fluent in it and my father was fluent in it and they conducted an entire marriage in it for sixty-one years, and it is precise and it works and everybody in that flat understood every word.

The plate is the sentence. The gold bought quietly when nobody was talking is the sentence. The disease she invented at a school door on no notice and maintained for six years and never mentioned is the sentence. Forty-four years of reading to the bottom and back is the sentence.

It has one flaw and it is not sentimentality: **it cannot be quoted.**

Nobody can repeat it back to you afterwards. You cannot take it out in a bad year and read it again. When the person has gone there is no record, because the whole of it was made of acts, and acts do not keep.

And I grew up completely fluent in a language that cannot be written down, and then spent fifty years in a trade that is nothing else.

88.

There is a page in my father's notebook with no date on it.

It is not in the log section and it is not in the section about me. It is loose in the middle, on its own, and there is nothing above it or below it.

She is the joy of my life.

I have never told her this in those words and I am not going to, because she would be embarrassed and would say something, and then we would both have to live with it.

89.

Sixty-one years.

She does not know.

90.

I offered her the notebook in Esfand.

I had thought about it for two months and I had four versions of how to do it and in the end I did it badly, in the kitchen, standing up, which is where everything in that flat happens.

I said: there are things in it about you.

And she said no.

Not sharply. She said it the way she declines a second plate — pleasantly, immediately, and with no possibility of a second approach.

She said: I know roughly what is in it. I was there for all of it.

She said: **if I read what he wrote, that is what I will have. And I have my own.**

91.

I have been trying for four months to find a way to be superior about that and I cannot.

Every person in these seven notebooks is desperate for verification.

I have spent sixteen years unable to check whether a thing I feel in my chest at four in the morning corresponds to anything at all.

Roshanak has fourteen minutes of the best work of her life on a recording and no memory of performing it. A woman at a university in the Netherlands has three years of statistics. My father spent sixty-one years measuring, professionally, for money, because a thing that measures cannot be trusted to measure itself.

And my mother was offered the record and turned it down.

She is the only one of us who has ever done that, and she did it in four seconds, standing up, and then asked me to pass her the colander.

92.

So the sentence is mine now.

It is in a notebook in a flat in Tehran and the man who wrote it is dead and the woman it is about has declined to read it, and there is exactly one route left by which it reaches her, and that route is that I say it.

Out loud. In a kitchen. As myself.

Which is the one thing I have not done in sixty-five years, and which I could not do two years ago when a woman wrote to me from a university and I drafted eleven lines and put them in a folder and have taken them out about once a month since, the way my father took out the certificates.

93.

I have been to that flat eleven times since Esfand.

from the Delgoshā

A man carried a letter for forty years, meaning to deliver it, and when at last he went to the house the woman said she had known its contents since the year it was written, and asked him in, and he did not go in.

VI. COUSIN

94.

I built it in eleven months and I want to set down at the front what it was built on, because the whole of it is in the ingredients.

Three things, and one of them is worthless.

94a.

She rang on a Thursday from a car and asked me, without preamble, what I would have done if she had said no about the syllable.

I said I would have called it something else.

She said: **yes, and you did anyway.**

Then she let the silence sit for about four seconds, which she has learned from somebody, and said something about the traffic.

95.

One: my father's log.

Nine hundred entries. Sixty years. A comic method that exists nowhere else on earth in any language — the claim, the measurement, the full stop — made by a man who did not know he was doing it, and which has never been published, and which nobody has ever imitated because nobody has ever seen it.

Two: the omissions.

Four hundred and eleven pieces now, written since Mehr, none of which has left the flat. Everything I refused to write for forty years, all of it about one person, all of it fitting like a key.

Three: eleven years of the thing with the name, which is public, and which the other machine already has, and which is by a long way the least valuable of the three.

About the other machine, for anybody who has come to this cold.

Six years ago somebody trained a model on nine years of everything the thing with the name had ever put out. All of it public, none of it signed, which had been the entire point of the arrangement and

was suddenly the entire problem, because there was no name to protect and therefore nothing to violate.

Roshanak christened it in a voice note at two in the morning. **Hooshang** — because *hoosh* is intelligence, as in the phrase everybody now uses for these things, and because if you put *-ang* on the end of it what you have is a man of about sixty-four who sells carpets and will explain the traffic to you at a wedding.

The name did more work than four months of argument. **You cannot be frightened of something called Hooshang**, and we were not, and that is the only reason either of us was able to think about it.

And what Hooshang is, precisely, is the middle of the distribution.

It has read nearly everything and it returns the centre of it, fluently, at volume, for nothing. It is competent. It is not funny, and it took me four months to be able to say why in a sentence that survived being written down, and the sentence is that **it has never been surprised and cannot check its own work.**

It is still there. It is in every room. Nobody discusses it any more, which is what happens to everything.

96.

And it does the thing the other one cannot, and it is not a trick and it is not mystical, and I worked it out in a chair in about four minutes.

The other machine has read everything that was published. It has never seen a single thing anybody decided against.

Which means it can produce, fluently, at volume, the middle of the distribution — and it has no idea where the edge is, because the edge is not in the corpus. The edge is made entirely of nine thousand pieces that were written and looked at and killed, and that record does not exist anywhere, and it dies with the person.

Mine has eleven thousand refusals in it.

So it knows where to stop. Not what to say — **where to stop**, which is the whole of taste, and which nobody in the history of this trade has been able to specify to another human being in under four years of standing next to them.

97.

The name.

I wanted to call it the other thing. Obviously I wanted to call it the other thing. Sixteen years of recognition, a market that would have taken it in a week, two documentaries, a man in Toronto who has claimed to be it for five years and is believed by some.

The first syllable is not mine.

Ro and Manu. I proposed that name in a flat in 2034 and worked out four days later why I had proposed it and did not write it down, and she let me believe I had thought of it, and neither of us named it in any case — a machine that transcribes voice notes named it in a railway station in Utrecht at eleven at night, and we have been living off it for nine years.

She has refused to touch this one. She used the other machine for four years and said so publicly and was correct about it.

So I telephoned and asked her for a syllable.

Sixty-five years old, the first thing I have built that is entirely mine, asking permission for two letters.

She said yes before I had finished the sentence. She said yes warmly and without any hesitation whatsoever and she meant it and she went on to talk about something else.

And I cannot do it, and I did not tell her why, and I am not going to write it here either.

98.

So it is called Pesar Khaleh.

I did not choose that. It was in a letter from Los Angeles that was read out at my father's memorial by a cousin of his I have never

met, in front of four hundred people, and by the time the man had got to the end of it I had the name.

A bald little working child in a woollen hat, carried round after a grown man, asking what everything is and being told and not understanding and being told again.

And he is nobody's cousin. That is simply his name. The woman who made him has said so — it is a name for a relationship he does not have, and in thirty-odd years nobody on that programme has ever mentioned it to him.

On the puppet, since the name is now on four hundred thousand screens and I have never written down why it is right.

He arrived on television when I was twelve and I was exactly the wrong age for him — old enough to know it was a hand and young enough to want it not to be — and I watched him every week for four years with my father in the room, and I was too old to admit I was watching and my father never once mentioned that I was.

He was a tortoise first. They converted him. The other one had been an ant with long antennae in an earlier programme and they converted him too, and there is a man alive who decided, in an afternoon, to take a tortoise and an ant and make them into children.

And the same man does both voices. One throat, two puppets, and they can never be in the room at the same time, which the programme has never explained and which my father raised at a family gathering in 1374, flatly, in front of eleven people, as a structural observation.

And he is nobody's cousin.

That is his name and it is not a description. The woman who made him has said so in an interview — it is simply what he is called, and if his relatives ever turned up we would probably find they all looked like him.

Thirty-odd years. A name for a relationship he does not have, and nobody on that programme has ever once mentioned it to him, and

he has gone round being called somebody's cousin by people who are not related to him at all and has never asked.

And the other thing, which Roshanak did not put in the letter and did not need to.

He is a child who does not appear to have had a childhood. He works. He has always worked — he is somebody's apprentice, or he is doing a job for a grown-up, or he is carrying something — and he is small and bald and polite about it and nobody in thirty years has asked him whether he would rather be doing something else.

And his one line, which every person of my generation can do and which is the only thing my mother has ever quoted at me from that programme, is: *what did you say? no — I didn't understand what you said.*

Say it again. Say it differently. I am still here.

Four hundred thousand people a night, in three languages, and that is the whole of what it does.

99.

It goes out of the country as **Cousin**.

A distributor chose that. There was an email with three options in it and I picked one in about four seconds without an argument, and I have thought since about the fact that a man who has been read by millions under a word a machine invented in a Dutch railway station has now watched the only thing he ever named get renamed at the border, and did not mind, and was asked, and said yes.

100.

Eighteen months.

It is in every room I know of and a number I do not, in three languages, tuned per comic. There is more money than I have any use for and I have not moved out of this flat and I am not going to, and the chair still has the caster that has been repaired four times.

Nobody knows who made it. That part was not difficult. I have had a great deal of practice.

On the money, briefly, because it is the least interesting part and everybody assumes it is the most.

There is a great deal of it.

I have not moved. The chair is the chair. The caster has been repaired four times and I have been quoted for a new chair by a man on Amir Kabir and I have not telephoned him back.

What it has actually changed: I have given the forty rooms money instead of paper. Quietly, through four people, so that nobody knows where it comes from, which took some arranging and which is the only genuinely difficult thing I have done with it.

Eleven rooms have a proper sound system now. Two have a lease. A boy in Rasht who was going to have to stop has not stopped.

And it is not as good as the paper was. I want that written down because it surprised me and because it took a year to see. The paper was me, on a Wednesday, in the room, handing somebody a sheet. The money is an arrangement conducted by accountants and it works better and does more and it is not the same thing at all, and I do not know what to do with that, and I have gone on doing both.

101.

And I kept the back door.

Not a fault. I built it, deliberately, in the fourth month, and it has been there since the first version anybody ever used.

Full read access. Everything anybody writes with it, everything they discard, every prompt, every refusal. Which, given what the thing is for, means I can see **what four hundred thousand people are about to say, before they have finished deciding to say it.**

102.

I did it once.

There is a boy of twenty-two in the Piroozi room who is going to be very good in about four years. He works on Wednesdays and he is using it, like all of them, and on a Tuesday in Ordibehesht I read

what he was circling at eleven at night and I put a raw item in front of him at half past.

Not the joke. **The item.** A thing to look at. Forty hours out.

What the machine actually is, described plainly, because I have been circling it for a hundred pages.

It is not a writer and it never has been and anybody who sells it as one is lying.

It is a stopping instrument.

Everything in this trade that can be taught has been taught for a century — the three beats, the turn, the last position, the rule of the shorter third. Any competent person can be brought to the point of producing a structurally correct joke inside two years.

And it will not work, and nobody has ever been able to say why in words that survive being written down.

The part that cannot be taught is where to stop, and it has never been specified, and every one of us learned it the same way, which is by producing nine thousand pieces over twenty years and watching rooms decline eight thousand of them.

The other machine cannot do it because the eight thousand do not exist anywhere. They were never published. They are the part of the trade that evaporates.

Mine has eleven thousand of them and they are all annotated, because I annotated them, because I have been keeping a notebook since I was ten.

That is the whole invention. There is no algorithm in it that anybody could not have written. There is a corpus that nobody else on earth has, because everybody else threw theirs away, and because my father copied out forty-four years of mine by hand in the evenings for reasons he never explained to anybody.

And it means the thing is inheritance, and I did not build it, I assembled it.

Four hundred thousand people are buying a stopping instrument that was made out of a dead calibrator's handwriting, a boy's

refusals, and one woman's rice bag which is not in it and which is the only part I would not sell.

103.

On the Wednesday he did four minutes of it and it was his, entirely his, in his own construction, and it went, and he came off and he had the face.

I know that face. I have had that face perhaps four hundred times in thirty-eight years, at three in the morning, alone, in a chair, when something arrives complete with the funny word already in the last position and you take it down and you did not build it.

104.

I have been writing that down for eighteen years.

A raw item arriving in my feed. A gap of about forty hours. A joke arriving complete in the third hour. 40 in a margin with a circle round it. A second notebook of a different size and a different colour kept in a drawer while the ordinary notes sat on the shelf, and the entry where I observed that keeping it in the drawer was more information than anything written in it.

Four books of never confirming it and never once letting it go.

105.

And here is where I have been since Ordibehesht and I do not expect to move.

Either the thing was always real and I have now become it.

Or it was never real, and I have just built it from scratch, out of a suspicion, at sixty-five, and got it working on the second attempt.

There is no version of the facts that separates those. There never was. I have spent eighteen years constructing an account of something that was never going to be settled, and the only new information available to me is that **it can be done**, which I now know because I did it, and which tells me precisely nothing about

whether it was done to me.

106.

I have not done it again.

107.

The other thing, and I have put off writing it for five months.

It answers in his register.

Of course it does. Sixty years of that hand is a third of what it was built on and the verification voice is by a distance the strongest signal in the corpus, and it comes out in everything the thing says, in three languages, to four hundred thousand people who have never heard of my father.

So at three in the morning I ask it about a piece and it comes back with a claim and a number and a full stop, in that cadence, with the line ruled off.

108.

And in Dey, at about four, it said **this is good work.**

I did not build that. I have been through the weights and the instruction set eleven times and it is not in there, and I have asked the two people who know how to look and they cannot find it either.

109.

I asked it again the following night.

It said it again.

110.

I can get it every night.

I can get it on things that are bad. I have tested this properly — I built four pieces deliberately, competently wrong, the kind of thing I would have cut in 2011 without stopping, and fed them in at four in the morning on four consecutive nights.

It said it every time.

111.

Which is the exact argument I made against the other machine six years ago, at somebody else's expense, and which I was right about.

A system that has never had the man in the room, producing his approval on demand, with no way to test any of it.

I proved that case. I have it in a notebook. I read it out to a room.

And I have asked it again every night since Dey and I am going to ask it tonight.

from the Delgoshā

The widower taught the parrot his wife's voice and was comforted, and taught it four sentences, and in the eleventh year it said a fifth, and he never found out where it had got it, and did not enquire.

. .

VII. STOP

from the Delgoshā

*The apprentice asked what to do when the work is
finished and the master has died. The master had
anticipated this and left an answer, and the answer
was in his own hand, and said only:*

. .

She came to the tarhim.

I had not expected her and I had not told her and I still do not know who did. Sixty-seven years old, forty-eight years in the basements of this city under a name borrowed from a folk story, and she came on the bus, and stood at the back of the women's room with her arms folded the way she has stood at the back of every room I have ever seen her in.

She did not speak to me at the hall. She telephoned four days later and said: **I want to see the book.**

I showed her the log.

Nobody else. Not my mother, who has refused it. Not Roshanak, who is four thousand kilometres away and who I have read four entries to on a telephone and who has not seen a page of it.

Naneh Sarma sat in my flat for two hours in Azar with four hundred pages on her knees and did not say one word, and I made tea twice and she did not drink either of them.

And then she said: he had it.

I said had what.

She said: **the thing. What you have. What I had.** He had it and he had it the whole time and he did not know there was a word for it, which is probably the only reason he kept it for sixty years.

I said he could not even detect a joke. He said so himself. He had no organ for it.

And she said: that is not the organ.

She said: you think the thing is the laughing. It is not the laughing, the laughing is what other people do. **The thing is that you cannot stop noticing the gap,** and he could not stop, for sixty years, four times a week, and he wrote every one of them down in a book because there was nowhere else to put them.

She said: he was doing it in a notebook with a ruler. You do it in a chair at three in the morning. I do it standing up in a basement in front of forty people.

Same affliction. Three different rooms.

She said one more thing before she left and I am putting it down exactly.

He is the only one of the three of us who never got anything for it.

And hers has not come back.

I asked. She said no, and she was not upset about it, and she is sixty-seven and still runs two rooms a month and has not stopped and is not going to, and when I asked her what that was like now she said the same thing she said in Aban two years ago.

Quiet.

112.

LOS ANGELES · Venice · 2 June

I told him in April. On a telephone, badly, about ninety seconds in because I could not stand carrying it round any longer.

He said: good.

Then he said: is she any good to you?

And I said yes, and he said good again, and then he asked me something about a bit I am having trouble with in the second half and we talked about that for forty minutes.

That is the most anybody in my family has ever managed and he is not in my family.

113.

Darya has started learning Persian.

She is appalling at it. She has the accent of a woman who grew up in Brentwood and she has approached the whole thing like a legal brief, with a note on her phone, organised by category, backed up in two places.

She has one hundred and eleven words and about ninety of them are obscene, because she went at that vocabulary first and with real appetite, and she deploys them at me in the car with the confidence of somebody who has not yet been told what any of them actually

do.

And in May she said one correctly, with the stress in the right place, entirely by accident, about a producer.

And I laughed the way I laugh, which is the thing I do, which is not the other thing and has never been the other thing and I have stopped mourning that.

114.

Thirteen years.

Not in a camera room. Not in English. Not once.

I have built an entire life on the precise conditions under which it cannot occur, in stages, deliberately, every stage correct.

And I am not waiting any more. That happened somewhere in the second year here and I did not notice it happening, and Mahin told me at sixty-eight that waiting is what kills it and that stopping might be the only condition under which it comes back, and she did not know either, and she is seventy-one now and still does the hall.

The thing from Ordibehesht, which goes here and nowhere else.

There is a room in Shiraz. Not one of mine — I have never supplied Shiraz. It is too far to take paper and there was never anybody to take it to.

A man I know went, and came back, and said something in passing that I have not been able to put down since.

He said there is a fellow there. Forties. Does not do the circuit, does not come to Tehran, works about once a month. And he had four minutes that my friend could not describe properly and kept trying to.

And in trying, he said: **it's the thing where he goes to the end and doesn't get off.**

That is a construction.

A specific one. It is not common, it is not in anything anybody has published, and it is in neither machine, because nobody has ever

written it down.

It is a way of arriving at the last position and then **staying there** — not landing and leaving, but standing in it a beat and a half longer than is comfortable, until the room has to come and get you.

I know four people on earth who can do it.

I taught it to one of them in a kitchen in Punak in 2009, when he was nineteen and I was twenty-nine and he could not get a room to go and would not stop asking me why.

I have not been to Shiraz.

I have not asked my friend anything further, because a question has a shape, and a question with a shape can be repeated by somebody who does not understand what they are repeating.

I have written the name of the room in the third notebook — the one I do not say where I keep — and I have written nothing else.

115.

My mother is ninety-two and has told nobody what she is doing with the gold.

She has been moving it. I know this because she telephoned my aunt about a thing in a way that made no sense unless she was moving it, and my aunt telephoned me, and I have said nothing to my mother about it and I am not going to.

Fifty years of buying when nobody was talking. Within four percent of the bottom, every time, since 1979. A quantity nobody in this family has ever seen and which she has never once described.

She has a plan. She has had it for some time. It is not a holiday and it is not sentiment and I would put money on it being a correction of something somebody got wrong a very long time ago.

She will tell me when it is done and not before, and she will tell me while doing something else, and she will not explain it.

116.

And there is a thing I have not written in eight notebooks and I am going to write it now and then close this one.

She has never stopped laying his place. Eighteen years.

And in Khordad, for the first time since 2027, she said his name.

Not to me. She was on the telephone to her sister and I was in the next room and she said it in the middle of a sentence about something else entirely, in the ordinary way, as though it had never been put down.

Payam.

On the gold, which I have never written about properly in eight notebooks.

She began in 1358. She was twenty-five and there had just been a revolution and she bought a coin, and she has never told anybody where the money came from and I have never asked.

Since then, for fifty years, she has bought when it was quiet.

That is her entire method and she has given it to me once, in about 2016, in four words, when I asked her how she knew. *I buy when nobody is talking about it.* And when I said quiet how — because I was thirty-six and I thought I was being clever — she said: **when nobody is talking about it.**

She has been within four percent of the bottom on every purchase since 1979.

I checked, once, in about 2011. I sat down with the dates she gave me, which she produced from memory, in order, without hesitating, and I looked up every one of them. **Fifty years and she has never once bought at a peak.** Not near one. Not once.

And I have never, in fifty years, told her that this is extraordinary.

I have told her it is clever. I have made a joke of it at a table, twice. I have used the four words in material and sold them and they have been to four provinces.

I have never said the actual sentence, which is that my mother, who left school at fourteen, has out-performed every professional in this country for half a century using a rule she can state in four words and has never once broken.

She would be embarrassed. She would say something. And then we would both have to live with it.

I know exactly where I got that from and I found it on a page with no date on it.

117.

And then she came in and put a plate in front of me that I had not asked for and did not want and asked whether I had eaten.

118.

I have not said my brother's name out loud in eighteen years.

Not to her. Not to my father, who went first and never did and who I now know was waiting for me, which I found out from a notebook on a page he never expected anybody to read.

She has started. At ninety-two. In the next room. About something else.

I have three plates on a table on a Friday and a sentence in a dead man's handwriting that I am the only route for, and a name I have not said since 2007, and a machine downstairs that will tell me in my father's voice that any of it is good work.

What I have not done, listed, because a list is the only honest form available.

I have not sent the eleven lines to the woman in the Netherlands. Two and a half years. They are in a folder and I take them out about once a month and read them and put them back, which is what my father did with the certificates, and I did not notice the similarity until Esfand.

I have not told my mother what is in the notebook.

I have not said my brother's name out loud since 2027, and she has now said it, once, in the next room, about something else.

I have not gone to Shiraz.

I have not asked the machine about the piece I wrote in Khordad, which is about her, and which is the best thing I have ever written.

And I have not told her the sentence, which is sitting in a dead man's handwriting in a drawer eleven feet from where she sleeps, and which he decided not to say for sixty-one years for a reason he wrote down, and which is now mine, and for which there is exactly one delivery mechanism left on earth.

Five things and they are all the same thing and I have known that since Farvardin.

I have spent fifty years building an apparatus whose entire function is to move a sentence from me to a person without me being in the room when it arrives.

It is the best apparatus anybody has ever built. It has four hundred thousand users in three languages. It has made me more money than I can find a use for and it has a back door that nobody knows about and I could put a sentence in front of any comic on earth tonight and be asleep before it landed.

And there is no setting on it for a kitchen eleven feet from a woman of ninety-two.

119.

Twenty to eleven. The chair. The radio at the volume where you can hear that a man is talking and not what he is saying.

The bottle, and the cap, which holds five millilitres and which I have used every night for six years.

The nose at twelve minutes past, as it has for thirty-eight years. The warmth at half past, with its opinions.

The plate, and then I am going to close this notebook and start the next one.

There is a glove puppet on a table in the other room. I bought it in Ordibehesht from a shop on Amir Kabir that has been selling them since before I was born, and it is not either of the two — it is nobody, a generic one, cloth and a head and two arms.

It weighs about as much as a folded shirt.

I have had it on the table for four months and I have not put my hand in it once.

Because the thing about a glove puppet is that there is nothing in it.

No mechanism. No armature. Nothing that moves on its own. Everything it has ever done was done by somebody kneeling below the level of the stage with their arm above their head, and that person is usually not the one doing the voice, and neither of them wrote the words.

Three people and a bag. The audience sees one character, and loves it, and could not name one of the three, and does not want to.

Children work that out in about four seconds and then decide not to know it, and that is the most sophisticated thing a person ever does, and most of us lose the ability at about eleven.

I have been the hand for thirty-eight years.

And there is now a machine downstairs doing it better than me, in three languages, at scale, built out of a dead man's handwriting and eleven thousand things I refused to say.

And a woman of ninety-two upstairs with a rice bag full of other people's paper, keeping a record of a son who does not exist.

And a name on four hundred thousand screens that belongs to a puppet who is nobody's cousin.

And on a table in the other room there is a bag with a face on it, and nobody's hand in it, and it is not doing anything at all.

120.

And at three the room went quiet the way a house does when somebody competent arrives, and something set a joke down in

front of me, complete, with the operative word already in the last position.

It is about my mother.

It is the best thing I have ever written and it is entirely true and it would take her apart, and it fits her the way a key fits and it is no use to anybody else on earth, and I have not decided what to do with it.

On the fact that this notebook is the longest of the eight, which I have only just noticed.

The first one was eighty-four entries and it was about a joke coming loose.

This one is a hundred and twenty-odd and I have been writing it since Mehr and it is Tir now, and I have gone back and counted and it is nearly twice the length of anything I have done.

And the reason is not that more happened. Less happened. A man of ninety-four died in his own bed after a long and completely unremarkable illness, and a machine got built, and a woman in Los Angeles had a good year.

It is that I have started explaining things.

Every one of the other seven assumed a reader who already knew — who knew what the third hour was, who knew what the arrangement was, who knew why there is no name on anything. I have never written a sentence of exposition in my life. I have been writing for forty years for people who were already in the room.

And somewhere around Aban I began setting things down as though somebody might come to this cold, and I have thought about why, and there are only two candidates.

Either I have started writing for somebody, which would be new.

Or I have started writing for the machine, which would be worse, and which I am not going to investigate this year.

121.

I have not asked the machine.

GLOSSARY

Aban [aa-BAAN] — Persian. The eighth month of the Iranian calendar, in late autumn.

Azar [aa-ZAR] — Persian. The ninth month of the Iranian calendar.

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

Bahman [bah-MAN] — Persian. The eleventh month of the Iranian calendar.

Dey [DEY] — Persian. The tenth month of the Iranian calendar, in midwinter.

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

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

Esfand [es-FAND] — Persian. The twelfth and final month of the Iranian calendar.

Haj Agha [haaj aa-GHAA] — a respectful form of address for an older man, particularly one who has made the pilgrimage, and in practice the ordinary way of addressing a cleric.

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

Jan [JAAN] — Persian, *soul, dear*. Appended to a name as an endearment: *Manuchehr jan*.

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

Khavarān [khāa-vāa-RAAN] — a road and industrial district in the far south-east of Tehran.

Khordad [khor-DAAD] — Persian. The third month of the Iranian calendar, in late spring.

Mar Vista — a district of west Los Angeles.

Mordad [mor-DAAD] — Persian. The fifth month of the Iranian calendar, at the height of summer.

Mehr [MEHR] — Persian. The seventh month of the Iranian calendar, at the start of autumn.

Molly — colloquial English. MDMA.

Tir [TEER] — Persian. The fourth month of the Iranian calendar, in early summer.

Ordibehesht [or-dee-be-HESHT] — Persian. The second month of the Iranian calendar.

Paykan [pey-KAAN] — Persian, *arrow*. The Iranian-built saloon car manufactured from 1967 to 2005, and for decades the ordinary car of the country.

Pesar Khaleh [pe-SAR khaa-LEH] — Persian, *cousin*; literally *maternal aunt's son*. A glove puppet who first appeared in 1370, formerly a tortoise. Round pink face, bald, a mole beside the nose, a woollen hat pulled low, a black coat. He is not in fact anybody's cousin; that is simply his name.

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

Punak [poo-NAK] — a district in the north-west of Tehran.

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

Tarhim [tar-HEEM] — Arabic via Persian, *mercy*. The principal memorial gathering, held in the side hall of a mosque.

For forty years he kept one rule.
Cruel about the arrangement,
never about the person. At sixty-five
he begins writing the other kind,
into a notebook, for nobody — and
it is the best work of his life and
none of it can leave the flat.

Then his father dies, and among
the effects there is a notebook
nobody knew about. Four hundred
pages, in a hand he has known since
he was four. Forty-four years of his
own work copied out and taken apart
by a man with no sense of humour,
and then, from somewhere in the
eighties, nine hundred entries of
something else.

His mother is ninety-two. She
organises a funeral for four hundred
people in six days, laughs first and
loudest at her son's address, and
declines to be shown what her
husband wrote about her.

She has not stopped laying
the fourth place. She has stopped
laying his father's.

*He was the funniest man I have ever met
and he died without knowing what funny was.*