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No. 94

ROUND TRIP

رفت و برگشت



C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

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For everyone still holding the phone.



THE UNDELIVERED

IN DEY 1404 IRAN'S CONNECTIVITY FELL TO ONE PER CENT OF NORMAL.
NINETY-EIGHT PER CENT OF ITS ADDRESSES STAYED ANNOUNCED TO THE WORLD.
THE ROADS WERE ALL STILL ON THE MAP. NOTHING WAS TRAVELLING THEM.

SYNOPSIS

Peyman has checked the roads for eighteen years. It is the whole of his trade and it is simpler than people imagine: you send out something small, you let it touch the far end, and you count how long it takes to come home. Twelve thousandths of a second to the hospital. Two hundred and fourteen to Toronto, where his daughter has lived for four years and where he has never been.

On the eighteenth of Dey he helps take his country off the map. It does not feel like a lever being pulled. It feels like a shift change, a two-hour drain, and a note of the time in his own handwriting.

Then he is asked which things must keep working, and he makes that list himself. The hospital. The dialysis unit. The ambulances. The wholesaler, so the pharmacies can order at night. Customs, so the containers move. The banks. Four hundred and sixty entries by the end, every one a decision, and nobody above him ever reads it.

In the second week he adds one address that has no business being there: a single house in Toronto. It takes forty seconds, and he knows before he types it that it will not let him speak to her. A home address answers nothing. All it can do is come back and say the house is still standing.

Then things start arriving in his sleep that he did not send for. A woman in Karaj telling her son for the ninth time that his mother has died. A recording that stops at ninety-four out of a hundred, and the part that is missing is always the part with the face in it. An old man holding a grandson he has never held.

Peyman is not a superstitious man, so he does what he has always done with a fault: he writes the readings down and looks for the cause. He finds a rule instead, and the rule is worse than no explanation. Everything he is being given belongs to a road he closed himself.

Nobody stopped talking. A whole country goes on reaching every night at nine, the way it always has, and all of it has to go somewhere.

A blackout, a list, and the one man on the wrong side of the door.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book descends from a company that stayed on.

When Egypt disconnected itself in Bahman 1389 (January 2011) — the first time a state had taken a whole country off the map — it did not take all of it. One provider, the Noor Group, was left running for several days, because the Egyptian stock exchange and a number of banks were on it. The first national shutdown in history had an exception written into it on the first night, and the exception was money.

Fifteen years later the exception is the entire design. Everything Peyman does in this book is the descendant of that decision: not a wall but a valve, not off but rationed, with somebody keeping the list.

What is documented. In Dey 1404 (January 2026) Iran's connectivity fell to around one per cent of normal while roughly ninety-eight per cent of its address space stayed announced to the rest of the world — the roads left on the map with nothing travelling them. An allowlist followed, then a second near-total cut, then a partial, tiered restoration. Access to the faster service was sold at about three times the price, allocated by profession and by clearance, and applied for in person with a written undertaking. The regulation underpinning it is titled, in its own words, after the facilitation of digital-economy businesses.

Short messages were restored first, because they are small, centrally readable and useless for organising. Circumvention tools were blocked in the days *before* the cut. Satellite terminals — perhaps fifty thousand in a country of eighty-odd million — were beaten by jamming that produced packet loss of thirty to eighty per cent, by the degradation of the positioning signal they need to find the sky, and by door-to-door seizure, with possession charged as espionage. A Bluetooth application and its local fork were downloaded roughly seventy-two thousand times in forty-eight hours and were later found to be unsafe. The country's payment system had been built to survive being cut off from outside and

proved defenceless against being cut off from within. The responsible minister publicly costed the damage at tens of millions of dollars a day.

None of that is unique to Iran. In 1404 (2025) there were 313 recorded shutdowns across fifty-two countries — a record — and eleven of them were for school examinations.

What is invented. Everyone. Peyman, his daughter, the neighbour, the boy on the fourth floor, the voice on the telephone, the seven in Karaj. The gateway is not a real building and the list of four hundred and sixty is not a real document — no Iranian shutdown order has ever been published, and no Iranian engineer has given a public account of carrying one out. What is on the page instead is drawn from the two places where operators *have* spoken: a network engineer in Bangladesh who wrote up the disconnection of his own country for a public routing forum in Tir 1403 (July 2024), and telecoms staff in Myanmar describing written instructions arriving nightly at around seven o'clock. The Bangladeshi account is the source of the only thing in this book I would call a finding. He notes that the commands were the ordinary ones — session by session, router by router — and that nothing in the protocol or the tooling distinguishes a routine cleanup from severing a country from the world.

I could find no documented case, anywhere, of a telecommunications operator refusing such an order, or of one being prosecuted for refusing.

And the rest is invented too. Nothing anybody dreams in this book has a mechanism. Messages do not accumulate anywhere except on the device that sent them, undelivered mail is not conscious, and no engineer has ever received a stranger's grief down a router. I have not supplied an explanation because I do not have one and because the book is not asking to be believed on that point. It is asking to be believed on the other one: that the harm of a shutdown is not silence. Nobody stops talking. The speech is all still there, and it has nowhere to go, and after long enough having nowhere to go becomes indistinguishable from never having been said.

No person in this book is a real person.

The dates are the real dates and I have not endorsed a figure for anything, because nobody has one. That is not an omission. It is the subject.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. THE LIST	12
II. THE QUIET	27
III. OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN	40
IV. ELEVEN HOURS	56

I. THE LIST

1.

HERE TO THE HOSPITAL

Twelve milliseconds.

I am going to write what happened in the order it happened, and then I am going to write what I was given, in the way I was given it. You will know which is which. The first kind is finished. The second kind is still going on.

First I should say what I do, because people hear where I work and think of something else. I am not a man who reads what you write. That is a different floor in a different building and I have never been in it. I am a man who makes sure the road is there.

If you send something from here to somewhere else, it goes along a road. Somebody built the road. Somebody has to check, every morning, that it is still where it was left. That is me. Eighteen years.

The way you check is you send out something small and you count how long it takes to come home. It goes, it touches the far end, it turns round, it comes back, and you count. Twelve thousandths of a second to the hospital. Three to the exchange on Vali-Asr. Two hundred and fourteen to Toronto, which is the other side of the world.

Two hundred and fourteen thousandths of a second to the other side of the world. I have never got used to it. Men I trained have stopped noticing. I have not.

The word for it in the trade is a round trip, and that is exactly what it is. The number is the going and the coming back together. You cannot take them apart. There is no way to measure only half of it.

What I want understood before anything else is this. A thing that does not come back does not tell you that it is lost. It does not tell you anything at all. You get nothing, and you sit with the nothing, and you decide on your own what to call it.

For most of my working life I called it a fault. I went and found it, and I fixed it, and by the afternoon there was a number again. That is a good job. I want to be clear that for eighteen years it was a

good job and I was good at it and I was never once ashamed of a single day of it.

2.

HERE TO THE EXCHANGE ON VALI-ASR

Three milliseconds.

The room is kept at eighteen degrees because that is what the machines want. The men in it wear coats indoors in Tir. There has been an argument about this since 1401 and it has never been settled, and I would not want it settled. It is one of the pleasures of the job.

A man came from procurement about it once, with a form. The form had a box for the affected party and the choices printed underneath were *staff* and *equipment*, and you could tick one.

He stood there for a while. Then he ticked equipment, because that was the one that had a budget.

We do nothing on that floor that is not written down a week before we do it. Every change goes to a board that meets on Tuesdays, five people, none of whom have been in the room, and the reason you give them has to fit in thirty characters. I have spent more of my life than I would like choosing between *upgrade* and *maintenance* because *replace the failing card in the third rack before it takes the eastern link down with it* is forty-nine.

Once a month a report goes round with the number on it. The number is what proportion of the month the network was healthy. It is worked out from the machines themselves — whether they answered, whether they were warm, whether they lost anything between one end of themselves and the other. For as long as I have been there it has never been below ninety-nine point nine.

The man on the other shift labels every cable. Both ends, with a machine that prints little plastic sleeves. He has labelled cables that go nowhere, that come out of a rack and end in the air behind it, and I asked him about it once, in the third or fourth year, thinking I was being funny.

He said they might go somewhere later.

3.

HERE TO TORONTO

Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds.

My daughter left four years ago and we spoke every evening at nine.

Not every. I should be accurate, because I am going to be asking you to believe some things later. There were evenings she had an examination and evenings I was on the floor and evenings when neither of us said why. But the arrangement was nine, and the arrangement held, and in four years I do not think we went a full week.

What I want to put down is that I never found it strange. That is the thing I have gone back to. For four years a rectangle of light on the kitchen table was my daughter, and I sat in front of it and ate my dinner and she sat in front of hers and it was morning where she was, and neither of us ever once remarked that this was an odd way for a father and a daughter to live.

You can see her hands. That is what I would say if somebody asked me why it was enough. You can see her hands, and when she is lying about something she puts them under the table, and she has done that since she was six, and I could see it happening in Toronto from a chair in Tehranpars.

I have never been. Four years and I have not once stood in a room with her in that country, and I did not experience that as an absence, because the nine o'clock was there, and the nine o'clock was every day.

The ticket is in the hall drawer. I bought her a *raft-o bargasht* [raft-o bar-GASHT] — a return, the going and the coming back, the two halves sold together because nobody imagines buying only one. She used the first half. The second half sat in the drawer under the screwdrivers and the fuses and the guarantee for a washing machine we no longer have.

It expired. I know it expired. I am not a sentimental man and I understood the terms.

I have taken it out nine times in four years and put it back.

4.

HERE TO SHIRAZ

Twenty-two milliseconds.

On the thirtieth of Azar we sat up for *Shab-e Yaldā* [shab-e yal-DAA] — the longest night, the one you are supposed to stay awake through, together, until it turns.

I had the fruit out and the *ājil* [aa-JEEL] — the mixed nuts and dried fruit you put on the table for it — in the good dish, which is a dish I take down twice a year and dust. My brother was in Dubai. My wife's sister was in Shiraz with her two boys. My daughter was in Toronto where it was the afternoon.

They were all in one window on one screen, four small rectangles, and my brother's rectangle froze about every ninety seconds and came back with him mid-word, and the boys in Shiraz were shouting at each other about something off to the side, and my daughter had put her laptop on a stack of books so that the angle would be right, and for a good part of that night I could see only her chin.

I cut the pomegranate. Everybody watched me cut it. Nobody in that room could eat it.

Somewhere around two my brother said the thing he says, which is that we should all be in one place next year, and everybody agreed, and everybody knew, and the agreeing was the point rather than the being in one place. My wife's sister read the Hafez. The connection to Shiraz was better than the connection to Dubai, which nobody thought was funny except me.

I remember being happy. I want that written down plainly because of what follows, and because I have noticed that people telling this kind of story go back and find the warning in the evening before, and I did not find one, and there was not one.

I remember thinking, while she was reading, that the thing carrying my daughter's face to me had six hops and a good margin, and that I knew every one of them, and that I could have drawn them on the tablecloth.

It was nine days before the eighth.

5.

HERE TO KURDISTAN

No answer.

I had done it before. I want to get to that now rather than let it arrive later as a surprise, because it was not a surprise to me, and a man who tells you he was surprised is usually telling you what he would like to have been.

There was the province where the mobile went off for two days in 1400 and I was one of four people who made it go off, and it was in no newspaper, and when I went home that week nobody I knew mentioned it, because nobody I knew was there.

There was the autumn when it came down every day at four in the afternoon and went back up around midnight, thirteen days of it. I worked most of those evenings. You set it running and then you sit, because there is nothing to do once it is running, and I read most of a book about bridges in that fortnight.

Four o'clock, every day, like a shop closing. That is the part I would tell you if you asked me what it is actually like. Not a lever. Not a room with a red light in it. A rota on the wall, and whoever is on, does it, and it takes about twenty minutes.

And afterwards it comes back and everything works and the report at the end of the month says the network was healthy for ninety-nine point nine eight per cent of the period, because the network was. That is what the number measures. It measures the machines.

I was commended twice. Once in writing.

Nothing was lost. That is the phrase and I used it for eighteen years and I will use it a great deal in what follows, and I am not going to take it out, because at the time I meant it exactly as it sounds.

6.

HERE TO THE SOUTHERN RING

Four milliseconds.

You can see the country's evening on a graph.

Not a figure of speech. There is a shape the traffic makes across a day and it is the same shape it made last Tuesday and the same shape it will make next Tuesday, and after enough years you stop reading it as a quantity and start reading it as a place. The dip in the afternoon is people asleep. The climb at six is people coming home. The long high plateau from nine to midnight is the whole country talking to itself. There is a small hard spike at about a quarter past eight in the evening that is a television programme, and there is another at dawn that is nothing to do with dawn, it is the machines in the banks.

You learn the mood before the news does. In the first week of Dey the shape changed. The evening got louder and it got longer and it stopped coming down at midnight, and on the eighth of Dey it did not come down at all.

I said something about it on the floor. The man on the other shift said the word that was going round, which was the bazaar, and something about the dollar, and then he went back to the cable he was labelling.

I want to be honest about what I understood, because it would be easy now to write myself as a man watching a country from above and knowing. I was not. I knew that a lot of people were awake. I could have told you which cities and I could have told you the hours and I could not have told you one thing that any of them were saying.

That is the entire nature of the work and I had never once thought of it as a limitation. I have thought about very little else since.

7.

HERE TO THE GATE

Under one millisecond.

The first call came on the twelfth, in the evening, and it was extremely polite.

He did not say who he was and I did not ask, because you do not, and because by the time a man is telephoning that number he has already been through the people whose job it is to ask. He called me *āqā-ye mohandes* [AA-ghaa-ye mo-han-DES] — Mr Engineer, which is what everyone calls a man like me — and he apologised for the hour, and he asked whether we could look at the traffic to certain places for a few days, in some districts.

Asked. I have thought about the word a great deal and it was asked. There is a way of asking that is not a request and everybody involved knows it, and it is still, grammatically, a question, and you still, grammatically, say yes.

He said thank you. He said it twice. He said *zahmat keshidid* [zah-MAT ke-shee-DEED] — you have taken trouble — which is what you say to a man who has carried your suitcase.

Over the next week there were five more calls and they were all like that. Some districts, not others. Some hours. Nothing you could see from outside unless you were inside one of those districts in one of those hours, in which case it was the only thing you could see.

I did not sleep badly. I want to put that down because I think people expect the not sleeping to start early, as a kind of credit, and it did not. I slept normally for another six weeks.

My daughter asked me on one of those evenings whether the internet was bad at my end because she thought I had frozen. I had not frozen. I had been thinking.

8.

HERE TO ANYWHERE

No answer.

On the eighteenth of Dey we took it down.

We began with the small one, the newer sort of address that hardly anything uses, because if the hands still work on that they will work on the other, and if they do not you have broken almost nothing. It went at a quarter to three in the afternoon. Nobody on earth noticed. I have a note of the time in my own writing because I write the time of everything, and the note says 14:42, and underneath it, for no reason I can now reconstruct, I had written *ok*.

Then we waited about four hours, which was not caution, it was the shift change.

At seven in the evening we started on the real one and it took about two hours to come down, and it did not come down like a light going off. It came down like water going out of a bath. You watch the number fall and there is a moment where it is a fifth of what it was and the country is still there, just thinner, and people are still getting through, slowly, badly, one word in four.

By a quarter to nine there was nothing.

Here is the part I did not expect and it is a technical part and I will try to say it plainly. We did not tell the world we had gone. The addresses of this country were still announced. As far as every other network on earth was concerned the roads into Iran were all still there, on the map, open, and traffic kept being sent down them for months.

It arrived at the edge and there was no edge. Nothing turned it back. Nothing told it there was a fault. The other side of the world went on sending, because nothing had ever told it to stop.

I understood at the time that this was a choice and that it was a clever one. It kept our options. It meant we could let some things through.

9.

HERE TO THE HOSPITAL

Twelve milliseconds.

The list started the next morning, and the list is mine.

He telephoned at about six and apologised again for the hour, and said that obviously certain things would need to keep working, and would I be so kind as to look at that, and he would leave it to me because I knew the network and he did not.

So I sat down with a pad.

The big hospital first. Then the dialysis unit on the other side of the city, because a dialysis unit books its people by machine and by hour and if it cannot book them it turns them away at the door. Then the ambulance dispatch, then the blood service. Then the pharmacy wholesaler, because the pharmacies order from the wholesaler every night and if they do not order at night the shelves are wrong by lunchtime.

Then customs, because the containers were sitting at Bandar Abbas. Then the banks. Then the card system. Then the payroll system, which I had never thought about in my life and which turns out to be four buildings.

By the middle of the morning I had ninety-one entries and by the end of the week I had over four hundred, and every one of them was a decision, and every one of them was mine, and not one person above me looked at the list from the first day to the last.

I was good at it. It is the best work I have ever done and I would like to say that without being misunderstood. Given what had been decided, the list was the difference between a country with no internet and a country with no dialysis, and I made that difference, at a desk, with a pad, in a cold room, by myself.

Nothing was lost. Ninety-nine point nine eight.

10.

HERE TO THE FLAT UPSTAIRS

No answer.

Outside it was not like that at all.

The cash went in two days. The machines had nothing in them by the Friday and the ones that had something would give you the price of about two kilos of meat and then apologise. People started keeping notes in their pockets, folded, the way my grandmother did. A man at the bakery had a school exercise book with the names of everyone who owed him, and by Bahman it was full, and he bought another one.

The woman upstairs came down on the second Thursday because her television had a message on it she did not understand. It was not a message. It was the box telling her it could not find anything, in English, in white on black, which is what those boxes do. I told her it was not her television.

She said, when does it come back.

I said I did not know, and that was true in the sense that I did not know, and it was not true in any other sense, and I stood in my own doorway and said it to a woman of seventy who had brought me down a plate of rice in Ordibehesht when I had the influenza.

Her son is in Sweden. I knew that already. Everybody in the building knows whose children are where; it is the first thing you learn about a neighbour and the last thing you forget. She said she had not spoken to him since before, and that he would be worried, and that he worries anyway.

I said it would probably be a few days.

She said, thank you, *āqā-ye mohandes*, and went back up. She was carrying the plate. She had brought it down on the plate.

11.

HERE TO A HOUSE IN TORONTO

Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds.

In the second week I put an address on the list that had no business being on it.

I am going to describe this exactly, because everything that happens afterwards happens because of it, and because I have noticed that when a man has done one clearly wrong thing in an otherwise ordinary life he tends to describe it in a fog.

It was a Sunday. It took about forty seconds. I opened the file that holds the list, and I went to the section for the medical group, which is the section nobody questions, and I typed in a single address belonging to a house in Toronto. Then I wrote the change up for the Tuesday board with the reason *clinical* — eight characters — and it was approved along with nineteen others by five people who were not in the room.

Three lines. It has never been found. Nobody has ever asked me about it and nobody ever will, because the list ran to four hundred and sixty entries by the end and no living person has read all of them but me.

And here is the part I have to be exact about, because it is the part that gets misunderstood every time I have tried to explain it, which is twice.

It does not let me talk to her.

A call does not go to a house. It goes to the company that makes the application you are calling on, and that company's machines are in Ireland or in California, and they hand it along. For a person here to speak to a person there, I would have to open the application — and the application is the one eighty million people use. That is not a line in a file nobody reads. That is the arrangement itself, undone, and somebody would see it inside the hour.

What I opened was the house. One ordinary home address in Toronto. And nothing answers at a home address except the box in the hall that the internet comes into.

So what I bought myself, at a price that would finish me if it were ever found, is this: *I can send something small to my daughter's building and see whether it comes back.*

That is the whole of it. Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds. The house is there. The road to the house is there.

It cannot carry one word.

I knew that before I typed it, and I want that on the record more than anything else in this account. I was not hoping. I did not misunderstand my own trade. I did it because sending something small and counting is the only kind of reaching I have ever been able to do, and a man will do the thing he knows how to do even when he knows it is no good.

That night at nine I sat down at the kitchen table in front of the screen, which was dark, and which has been dark since the eighteenth, and I ate my dinner in front of it, because nine was the time.

12.

HERE TO TORONTO

Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds.

She is at the table with her back to the window and it is morning there and the light comes over her left shoulder the way it always does.

She says, you look tired.

I say I am not tired, I am cold, the room at work is cold. She says I always say that. She holds up the cup to show me it is the one we sent, the one with the chip in the handle, and she says she still uses it, and she turns it so that I can see the chip.

She tells me about the woman at the laboratory who has decided that my daughter is the person to ask about everything, and about

the bus that comes at eight and is never at eight, and about a man on the course who will not stop explaining a thing she explained to him. She does the voice. She has always done the voice. She is very good at it and it is the only cruelty in her.

Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds. I check it while she is talking, the way I check everything, and it is steady and it is good and there is no loss on the line at all.

She says, *bābā* [baa-BAA] — dad — you're doing it again.

I say doing what.

She says, the thing with your eyes, when you're counting. I woke up at twenty past four with the lamp still on and my shoes on, and I was happy, and I lay there in the dark being happy for about a minute and a half before I remembered that the thing I had just done was not possible.

Nothing had carried that. Nothing could have.

What I have to that house is a road with nothing on it. I can knock on the door of the building. I cannot say anything through it. There is no application, no line, no service and no path in this country by which my daughter's voice could have reached my kitchen that night, and I know that better than any living man, because I am the one who took them away and the list is in my own handwriting.

I had checked the road myself at half past twelve that same night, from the floor, with my own hands. Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds. The house was there.

That is what the road carries. It carries the fact that the house is there.

It does not carry her.

I got up and I made tea and I stood in the kitchen and worked it through twice, properly, the way you work through a fault.

Then I thought: it was a dream about my daughter. I am a man who has not seen his daughter in four years and the connection is gone and I had a dream about her. There is no fault here. There is nothing here to find.

I went back to bed and I slept until nine, which I had not done in twenty years.

II. THE QUIET

13.

HERE TO THE SOUTHERN RING

Four milliseconds.

The first thing everybody got wrong, afterwards, was that they called it the quiet.

It was not quiet. Nobody stopped talking. The woman upstairs talked into a handset every evening at the same time for nine weeks, because that was the time, and the handset was not connected to anything, and she knew it was not connected to anything, and she did it anyway.

Inside the country the roads were all still there. That is what most people never understood and what I could not explain to any of them. The traffic between here and here was fine. Four milliseconds to the southern ring, the same as always. The machines were in perfect health. It was only that everything anyone actually wanted was on the other side of a thing that no longer existed.

So the graphs did not go flat. That is the part I would like on the record. For weeks the shape of the evening was still there — the dip in the afternoon, the climb at six, the long plateau from nine — because the country went on doing at nine exactly what it had always done at nine.

It went on reaching. It reached every night all winter. It got nothing back and it reached again the next night.

I sat on the second floor and watched a country try eighty million times a day, and the number that describes that is not a small number, and there is no name in my trade for what it was measuring.

14.

HERE TO A ROOF IN SAADAT ABAD

Answered from the sky.

There were the dishes.

I should explain them properly because people abroad said the word like it settled the matter. The dish is about the size of a laptop and it does not talk to a cable, it talks upward, to satellites that are low and fast and go over you and hand you on to the next one like men passing a bucket. The point of it is that it does not touch this country at any point. It goes from a roof in Saadat Abad to the sky to a ground station somewhere else entirely, and there is nothing of ours anywhere along the way.

On paper it cannot be stopped by anybody in this building. That is true and it stayed true and it did not help.

Here is what happened instead, in order.

First they had to be brought in, one at a time, in bags, across a border, and a man who does that wants paying, and by that winter the money was what it was. So there were perhaps fifty thousand of them in a country of eighty-odd million. Even if every one had worked perfectly, all day, all winter, that is one for every sixteen hundred people. And they were not spread out over the sixteen hundreds. They were in the parts of north Tehran where a man can pay for one.

Second, they needed to know where they were. A dish has to find the satellite, and to find it, it has to know the time and the place very exactly, and it gets that from another set of satellites altogether — the ones your car uses. Those had been unreliable in this country since the summer before, for reasons to do with the war and nothing to do with any of this. A dish that does not know where it is stares at the wrong part of the sky.

Third, they were jammed. Not by us; that is not a thing done from a room like mine. It is done with power and antennas by people I have never met. What it does is put noise on top of the signal, and the dish keeps working — that is the cruel part — it keeps working

and drops a third of what you send, then a half, then four fifths. Nothing is broken. Everything is just wrong.

The company that owns the satellites pushed something down to the dishes to get under the noise, and it worked, and the losses came down for about a week.

Then the noise changed.

15.

HERE TO A ROOF IN SAADAT ABAD

No answer.

We were asked for a list.

Not to jam anything. We could not have jammed anything. We were asked which of the addresses on our networks were behaving like a dish — because a dish on a roof still has to reach a telephone or a laptop in the flat below it, and that hop is ours, and it looks like nothing else on earth.

I did not make that list. I want that on the record and I also want on the record that this is the only one I did not make, and that the reason was not conscience. It was that I was at the hospital with my sister-in-law's boy that week and a colleague did it in four hours.

I checked his work afterwards. It was good work.

They went to the doors in Tehran and Isfahan and Tabriz and took them, and by the end of Bahman the ministry said forty thousand had been cut, which is a figure I cannot check and have no reason to believe or disbelieve, and I am only putting it here because it was said.

A dish had been illegal to own since the summer. The charge is not the charge you would expect. It is not smuggling. It is the other one.

So a man with a dish on his roof in Bahman was not a man with better internet than his neighbours. He was a man whose whole family understood exactly what would happen if the wrong person

came up the stairs, and who had to decide, every single evening, whether talking to his son was worth it that night.

Most of them decided it was, for a while. That is the thing I think about. It was not the jamming that ended it in most buildings.

16.

HERE TO THE CARD SYSTEM

Seventeen milliseconds.

The money did not stop. I want to be accurate about this because it is the part people get wrong in the other direction.

The card system was on my list from the first morning. So were the banks and the payroll and customs, and on the eighth day the containers were moving again at Bandar Abbas and a declaration for a load of floor tiles went out of this country without a second's delay.

What stopped was everything under that. The banks were talking to each other perfectly and the machine on the corner had nothing in it, because the cash goes round by lorry and by men, and the men were not sure, and a thing that everybody is not sure about becomes true in about four days.

By the end of the second week a machine would give you about the price of two kilos of meat and then apologise politely. The baker had his exercise book. My barber went back to a system his father had used and could explain it to me in one sentence.

The shops that sold things to people elsewhere in the country were fine. The shops that sold things to people abroad were not, and there were more of those than anybody had counted, because for fifteen years the only good advice you could give a young person in this country was to learn to sell something to somebody outside it.

I read a figure later that the minister himself gave, for what each day cost. I am not going to put it down here because I only ever saw it repeated and I was not in the room.

What I will put down is the thing that struck me at the time and has not stopped. The system that moves money in this country had been

built to survive being cut off from the outside. Years of work. Whole careers. It was armoured against foreigners.

Nobody had ever built it to survive being cut off from the inside.

17.

HERE TO THE FOURTH FLOOR

No answer.

The boy from the fourth floor came down in the third week with a list of his own.

He is twenty-two and he is not a fool. He had thought about it properly and he had four ideas and he came to me because everybody in the building knows what I do, or thinks they do, and because I am the man you ask.

He said, a VPN.

I said that a VPN is a tunnel, and a tunnel needs a road. When they are watching what you send, a tunnel hides it from them, and that is a real thing and it has worked in this country for twenty years. But they were not watching. There was nothing there to hide from. The road itself was gone, and you cannot dig a tunnel through the place where a road is not.

He said, all right, and then he said the two names that everybody says, and I told him the thing that I had only worked out myself a week earlier and that had made me put down my tea. Those two had stopped working on the fifteenth of Dey. Three days before. Before there was anything to escape from.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said: so they knew.

I said that somebody knew.

He said, the Bluetooth thing. His cousin had it. You put it on your telephone and it talks to other telephones near you without going through anybody, and seventy thousand people had it inside two days.

I said that it works across a street and not across a city, and that every time it hops from one phone to the next it gets slower and

smaller, and that there is no number of hops between Tehranpars and Sweden. And I said the other thing, carefully, because I did not want to frighten him and it was true — that nobody had checked it. That it had been written fast and put out fast and downloaded by seventy thousand frightened people in forty-eight hours, and that later, when people who know how did look at it, they found holes in it you could walk through.

He said, so what do we do.

I said, wait.

He looked at me for a while. He is a polite boy and he did not say any of the four or five things he had a right to say. He said thank you and went back upstairs.

He tried it all anyway. Of course he did. I would have.

18.

HERE TO THE FOURTH FLOOR

No answer.

I did not sleep well that night and it was the first time, and it was not the dreams.

It was that I had given him the correct answer.

Every single thing I told him was true and I could have proved all of it, and I have gone over that conversation more times than any other in my life, and I cannot find the error. The tunnel does need a road. The Bluetooth does stop at the end of the street. The two names were blocked on the fifteenth. He asked an engineer a technical question and got a technical answer and the answer was no.

Here is what I did not say, and I want it written down because it is the only thing in this account I am ashamed of in a way I can put into words.

All four of his ideas were ideas for getting one person out. That is what every one of those things is. A tunnel takes you through. A dish on a roof is one roof. Even if I had handed him something that

worked, that night, in his hand, it would have got him his cousin in Hamburg, and it would have got him nothing for the woman on the seventh floor, or the baker, or the man with the exercise book, or my neighbour who was talking into a dead handset at the same hour every evening.

Eighty million people did not need a way through. They needed their evening back.

There is no tool for that. There has never been one. The thing that was taken was not an individual's, and everything anybody has ever built to get it back works on one individual at a time.

That is what I should have told him, and I did not, because it is worse.

19.

HERE TO TORONTO

Nine hundred milliseconds.

She is in the kitchen and she has the cup with the chip in it and there is something she is not telling me.

She says the thesis is fine. She says the woman at the laboratory has stopped asking her things and started telling her things, which she says is worse. She says the bus.

I say, what is it.

She says, what.

I say, you have your hands under the table.

She laughs at that, and there is a gap before the laugh. Not a long one. Less than a second. She says, you're doing the counting thing, and I say I am not, and I am.

Nine hundred. It had been two hundred and fourteen for four years and every night this week it has been more than that and tonight it is nine hundred, which is not a number you would notice in a conversation and is not a number I could stop noticing.

A gap like that means the road got longer. Nothing else means it. Either the road got longer or something in the middle is holding on to her before it passes her on.

She says, *bābā*, are you listening.

I say yes. I went in early and checked the line from the floor with my own hands at ten past five in the morning and there was no line. There has not been a line since the eighteenth of Dey. There is no road at all, so there is no length for it to have.

I wrote the number in my notebook anyway. Nine hundred. Under it I wrote the date.

I have thought about why I did that and the answer is not interesting. I write down readings. That is what I have done every working day since 1385. A man does not stop being what he is because the reading is impossible; he writes it down and goes to look for the fault, and if he cannot find the fault he writes it down again tomorrow.

20.

HERE TO MYSELF

Twelve hours.

I became tired in a new way and it took me three weeks to notice, because tired is not a thing you examine.

It was not sleepiness. I was sleeping. It was the other kind, the kind you get from carrying a wardrobe down two flights with your brother-in-law, where the tiredness is in your arms and your back and not behind your eyes.

I started taking the stairs at work slowly. Then I started holding the rail. Then one afternoon I put my bag down on a landing to change hands, and I have carried that bag since 1391 and there is a laptop and a lunch in it.

So I weighed myself, because that is what I do. The scale in the equipment room is the good one, the one we use for the rack loads, and it is correct to fifty grams, and I have used it for years and it has never once been wrong about anything.

It said what it said in Azar. Not a kilo either way.

I am heavier. I know the difference between a reading and a fact, and this is the first time in eighteen years that the two of them have come apart in my hands, and I stood there in a cold room with my shoes off and had to decide which one to believe.

I decided to believe the scale, because the scale is the instrument and I am not.

I still hold the rail.

21.

HERE TO THE MESSAGE SERVICE

Two milliseconds.

On the twenty-seventh they gave back the short messages.

I had a hand in it. It is not difficult; it is the oldest thing on the network and it goes down a path that was old when I started. It came back across a Friday and by the evening every telephone in the country made its noise at once, and in the stairwell people were reading them out to each other.

I want to say what it is, because everyone in the building treated it as the beginning of the end of it and it was not.

A short message is a hundred and sixty characters. It cannot carry a photograph and it cannot carry a recording and it cannot carry a video of a street. It goes through the middle of the network in a form anybody in the middle can read, and it always has. And it will not reach anybody outside the country unless somebody decides it should.

So: they gave back the one channel that is small, readable, and ours.

That is not a concession. It costs nothing. I knew that on the Friday afternoon while I was doing it and I did it well and it took about six hours.

The woman upstairs came down on the Saturday to ask me to help her send one, because her eyes are not good for the small keys. I sat on her step and typed it for her.

It was fourteen words. It did not go anywhere. There was no path out of the country for it and I knew that while I was typing it and she watched my thumbs and thanked me and I said it might take a little while to arrive.

Nothing was lost.

22.

HERE TO A ROOM I DO NOT KNOW

Five weeks and two days.

There is a woman in a room and the room has the sound a room has when the television has just been turned off.

She is saying it again. She has said it nine times tonight and each time she starts further back. First she said it plainly. Then she started with the hospital. Then with the Tuesday. Now she is starting with the year he was born, because she has worked out that if she goes far enough back he will have to still be there at the end of it.

He is not there. He has never been there. He is in Sweden and it is half past two in the afternoon and he is at work.

Behind her a man is waiting to have his turn, and when she stops he takes the handset and he starts with the weather. I woke at ten past three and I did not know that woman and I have never been in that room and I could describe the runner on the floor of it to you now.

It was the first one that was not my daughter.

I sat on the edge of the bed for a long time. I would like to write that I was frightened and I was not. What I felt was the thing you feel on the floor when a machine reports something that is not in the manual — a kind of leaning forward. I thought: something is arriving that I did not send for.

And underneath that, quieter, and I did not look at it directly for another month: whose son is he, and does he know.

23.

HERE TO EVERYWHERE THAT IS ALLOWED

Between nine and nine hundred milliseconds.

On the sixth of Bahman it stopped being a blackout and became a list, and the list was the thing I had been building since the first morning.

They called it the new normal on the radio. What it was, was this: the roads stayed gone for almost everything, and a set of places were let through, and the set was written down, and I was the one who wrote it down.

Through: the mail service that half the country's businesses run on. The place where the programmers keep their work. The machine that answers questions, which I never understood the presence of and did not ask about. The shops. The banks. The games console my nephew has, which I put on myself in the second month for reasons I am not going to dress up.

Not through: the place where you see people's faces. The place where you send a voice. The one everybody's family is on.

I have read the list over many times since, and I have thought about how it would look to a person who did not know that it was assembled by one tired man with a pad over five weeks, each line added for a reason that was good at four in the afternoon on the day it was added.

It looks like a statement. It looks like somebody sat down and set out, item by item, what a person is for.

Nobody did that. That is the part I cannot get anybody to understand. There was no meeting. There is no document anywhere that says a container of tiles matters more than a grandmother, and yet if you read what I built, in order, that is what it says, and it says it in my handwriting.

24.

HERE TO A ROOM IN KARAJ

Six weeks and four days.

Then they came in numbers.

Not all at once. It went the way a leak goes — one, then nothing for three nights, then two in a night, then every night. By the middle of Bahman I was getting four and five a night and I was sleeping fourteen hours at a weekend and getting up more tired than I went down.

A man being told his mother has died by seven people, one after another, none of whom knows about the others.

A girl of about ten with her hand flat against a screen, saying the same sentence.

A recording of something important that stops at ninety-four out of a hundred, every time, and the part that is missing is always the part with the face in it.

An old man on the edge of a bed, moving side to side without having decided to.

On the nineteenth of Bahman I got up at four and found a school exercise book in the drawer where my daughter's old ones are, and I wrote down what I could remember: the room in Karaj, the runner on the floor, the seven of them, what time it was there. I wrote *Sweden*, and then I wrote a question mark, and then I crossed the question mark out because I was sure.

It took me forty minutes and my hand hurt afterwards, which it has not done since school.

I did not have a plan for the book. I want to be honest about that. I was not building anything and I was not keeping evidence and I had not thought one step past the end of the page.

I wrote it down because I write things down. That is all it was, on the nineteenth of Bahman, at four in the morning, at my daughter's old desk.

III. OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

25.

HERE TO A ROOM I DO NOT KNOW

Seven weeks.

By the end of Bahman there were enough of them to sort, and sorting is what I do, so I sorted them. There are three kinds and I have never found a fourth.

The first kind has a time on it. Somebody said a thing and it did not arrive. There is a sender and there is a direction and there is an hour, and it sounds exactly like people talking, because that is what it is. A woman in a room with the television just turned off. A man starting with the weather. These are the loudest and they are the easiest, and for a while I thought they were all of it.

The second kind has nothing on it at all. No hour, no sender, nowhere it was going. Somebody made a sentence very carefully, standing at a window, the way you do, and then did not send it, because by then there was nothing to send it into. So it stopped where it was made. These do not sound like talking. They sound like weight.

The third kind has no words in it. It is not a message and it never was. It is a thing that did not happen — not to anybody, not anywhere, not once. A man holding a child he has not held. A woman standing in a room she was never in. These are the ones with time in them; they take as long as the thing would have taken, and you sit through all of it.

I am putting this down at the front of this part because I am about to write a great many of them and I want you to know which is which without my having to say. It is not difficult. The first kind has an hour. The second has nothing. The third has no words.

And they are not three different things. They are one thing at three distances from the wire — a message that did not arrive, a message that was never made, and a life that was never lived. Each one further out than the last. Each one harder to put right.

26.

HERE TO A ROOM IN KARAJ

Seven weeks and one day.

There is a woman in a room and the room has the sound a room has when the television has just been turned off.

She is saying it again. She has said it nine times tonight and each time she starts further back. First she said it plainly. Then she started with the hospital. Then with the Tuesday. Now she is starting with the year he was born, because she has worked out that if she goes far enough back he will have to still be there at the end of it.

He is not there. He has never been there. He is in Sweden and it is half past two in the afternoon and he is at work.

Behind her a man is waiting to have his turn. When she stops he takes the handset and he starts with the weather. He says it has been mild. He says his knee has been bad. He asks whether the boy is eating. Then he says it, and he says it well, better than any of them, and he is the only one who does not cry.

There are seven of them in that flat and every one of them thinks they are the one who has to tell him. None of them knows about the others. They have all been raised the same way, so all seven spend the first twenty seconds on something else, and all seven arrive at it from a different direction, and all seven are kind.

I have heard it four hundred times. I know their voices. I know which one cries and which one does it properly and which one says *azizam* [a-zee-ZAM] — my dear — at the start of every sentence, like a man laying something down carefully.

None of it arrives.

Last night I said it too.

27.

HERE TO NOWHERE

No hour.

This one has no time on it and it is not going anywhere.

It is one sentence. Somebody made it very carefully, the way you do, standing at a window, getting the words in the right order and then getting them in the right order again. And then did not send it, because by then there was nothing to send it into. So it stayed where it was made.

I do not know who made it. I do not know who it was for. I do not know whether they are in this city or in Zahedan or dead. I have had it for nineteen nights now and it is the same every night and it is fourteen words long.

I am not going to write it down here, because it is not mine.

What I will say about it is this. It is not a beautiful sentence. It is the kind of thing a person says once in a life and then spends the rest of the life not saying, and the reason it is fourteen words and not four is that they went back and added the part that makes it survivable for the person hearing it.

They put in the softening. Then they did not send it.

That is the part that does me. Not the sentence. The fact that somebody sat with it long enough to be kind in it, and then had nowhere to put it, and it has been lying in the dark with its kindness still on it for nine weeks, like food somebody cooked for a person who is not coming.

28.

HERE TO A ROOM THAT IS NOT ANYWHERE

No hour.

There is a man of about seventy sitting on the edge of a bed with a baby along his forearm.

He has the baby's head in the crook of his hand. He is doing the thing where you move, very slightly, side to side, without having

decided to. The window is open. It is early and the light is the light you get at that hour. Someone is running a tap in another room and they are taking their time about it.

He is looking at the baby's ear. Not the face. The ear. He has been looking at it for some time.

He tries the name. He says it quietly, once, to see what it is like in his mouth. Then he says it again with the other half of it, the way you do with a child's name when nobody is listening, the long form nobody will use for twenty years.

This never happened. Not in Tehran, not in Hamburg, not anywhere on earth. He is here and the child is there and they have never been in a room together, and by now they never will be, because the baby is nine months old and does not lie like that on anybody's arm any more.

It lasts about forty minutes. I have to sit through all of it.

It is the nicest thing that happens to me all week and I would do anything to make it stop.

29.

HERE TO MYSELF

I no longer know.

I stopped being able to add up my own time in the middle of Bahman.

Four hours. That is what the clock said and I believe the clock. But I would come up out of it having been somewhere for a long while — not a night, a stretch — and I would stand in the kitchen with the kettle on and have the feeling you get off a long flight, where the day you have landed in is not the day you are owed.

That feeling goes in a few hours. This did not. It arrived every morning and it added to the one before.

By the end of the month I was getting up with a season behind me. I do not know how else to write it. I had not aged in any way a doctor would find. My hair is what it was. But I was old in the way a

man is old who has done a thing for a very long time, and I had done it for a very long time, and it had been four weeks.

The scale still says what it said in Azar. I have weighed myself nine times now. I have started writing the readings down, with the date, in the same book, under the other numbers.

The man on the other shift asked if I was sleeping. I said I was sleeping a great deal, which was true and was not an answer, and he accepted it, because he is not a man who pushes and because we have worked next to each other for nine years without ever once having a conversation that was not about the building.

He labelled four cables that week. Two of them go somewhere.

30.

HERE TO THE HOSPITAL

Twelve milliseconds.

I worked out the rule on the fourteenth of Esfand, on paper, at my own desk, the way you work out any fault. You write down what you have got. You write down what the difference is between the ones that behave and the ones that do not. Then you stop guessing.

What I had was two hundred-odd of them, written in the book, with their hours and their rooms.

And what they had in common was this. *Every single thing I was being given belonged to a road I had switched off.*

Nobody dreams of the hospital. I checked. The hospital has been reachable every hour of every day since the nineteenth of Dey, because I put it there, and in ten weeks not one scrap of hospital has come to me. Same for the banks. Same for the customs shed. Same for the place where the programmers keep their work, which is on my list and which I have never once dreamt about and which, I would guess, nobody in this country has.

What comes is the faces. What comes is the voices. What comes is the place where you send a photograph, and the one everybody's family is on, and the one where you see a person while you talk to them.

I took those off. I took them off in the first week, sitting at a desk with a pad, for four hundred and sixty good reasons.

So here is the rule, and I am going to set it down flat, because I cannot account for it and I am not going to pretend that I can.

Shut a door, and everything that hits the door piles up on your side of it.

Not on their side. Not in the wires. On mine. I closed those roads and the country went on reaching down them every evening at nine, the way it always had, and all of that reaching had to go somewhere, and the somewhere is the man who closed them.

I have looked for a mechanism. There is no equipment in that building that could hold this and there is nothing on anybody's telephone that explains it. I have spent my whole life finding the cause of things and I cannot find the cause of this one. After a while I stopped looking, because the rule works whether or not I understand it, and every night it works again.

It is not that the country stopped dreaming of its people. The country stopped being *able* to. I did that, on a Sunday, in about forty seconds each, and every one of them was approved on a Tuesday by five people who were not in the room.

Nothing was lost. It all came here.

31.

HERE TO TORONTO

No answer.

I went looking for her.

That is the only night I can be accused of using it, and I am putting it down because leaving it out would make the rest of this a lie. I lay down deliberately. I made the conditions I had noticed were the conditions — the floor, the late shift, the cold — and I went in and I looked for my daughter in there the way you look for a fault, methodically, from the top.

She is not in it.

Not dark. Not missing. Not a road with no answer at the end, which is a thing I understand and could have lived with. *Not present at any point in any of it.* In ten weeks, in something over four hundred of them now, in a country's whole unsent evening, with every kind of person coming through — my daughter does not appear.

I have two explanations and I cannot choose between them and I have had six weeks to try.

The first is that she is well. That nothing of hers is stuck in there because nothing of hers is stuck anywhere; she is on the other side of the wall, in a place where things work, and she is getting on with it. That the reason I cannot find her among the undelivered is that she is not undelivered. This is the explanation a reasonable man takes.

The second is that she has stopped.

I still dream of her. Four or five times a week, at the table, with the cup, with the light over her left shoulder. But I have known since the fourteenth of Esfand what those are made of, and they are made of me — of a man reaching every night down a road that carries nothing, with nowhere for the reaching to go. And they are getting further away every week, and I have written the numbers down.

Nine hundred. Then two seconds. Then four.

32.

HERE TO A HALL SOMEWHERE

Nine weeks and three days.

There is a young woman standing up in a room with about sixty people in it and a table of older men at the front, and this is the day. You can see it is the day. She has done her hair in the way you do for a thing you will look at photographs of later.

The camera is on a chair. Somebody has propped it on a coat.

She begins. She is nervous for about ninety seconds and then she is not nervous at all, and the change is visible, and it is the best thing I have ever watched a stranger do. One of the men at the front

writes something down and she sees him do it and it does not touch her. She answers him. She answers the second one better.

It goes to ninety-four out of a hundred and then it stops.

It has stopped there every time. The end is always the part that did not make it. Every single one of them. I have never once got a whole thing — they go to eighty, to ninety-one, to ninety-four, and what is gone is always the piece with the face in it, the turning round, the looking for someone.

I have thought about this for a long time and I do not think it means anything.

I think it is just that people put the good part at the end.

Her mother is in Kerman. Her mother does not know. Her mother has not known since Dey, and by the time she knows, the girl will have said it so many times to so many people that it will have become a thing that happened rather than a thing that is happening, and her mother will get the finished version, smoothed, with the nerves taken out of it.

I have the nerves. Nobody wanted them and they came to me.

33.

HERE TO A ROOM WITH MORE THAN ONE PERSON IN IT

Ten weeks and one day.

For ten weeks they were alone. That is the part I did not think to write down, because it is the kind of thing you only notice when it stops.

Each one came on its own. A woman in her room. A man with the weather. The girl at ninety-four. They did not know about each other and they did not know about me. I was standing in a hallway with a great many doors in it, and behind each door was one person saying one thing to somebody who was not coming, and the doors did not open onto each other.

Then, on a Sunday at the end of Esfand, the man with the weather stopped in the middle of the knee.

He stopped, and he waited, and then he said: she has already told him.

He was not talking to Sweden. He was answering the woman with the television just turned off, who has been in a different flat and a different week for ten weeks, and who had just got to the year the boy was born.

I went through it afterwards the way you go through a fault. There is nothing in a queue that lets one thing in it know about another thing in it. A queue is not a place. It is an order.

But a thing that sits long enough in one order starts to be a place, and I have not got a better sentence than that, and I am not going to pretend it is an explanation.

After that they were in the same room, and the room got fuller every week.

They are not kind to each other. I want that down, because the way people write about this sort of thing afterwards is all one temperature. The seven in Karaj found out about each other and it did not go well. There is a woman who wants to know who told the police about her nephew, and she asks every night, and nobody answers, and she has begun to decide. There is a man who will not stop about a car. There is somebody who says the young ones brought it on the rest of us, and says it in the voice a man uses when he has appointed himself the one who says the hard thing, and he is not talking to anybody in particular, and I have got very tired of him.

And there is a girl of about nine with her hand flat on the glass of a screen in a hospital corridor, and she has had it there since Dey, and she does not join in.

Once they could hear each other they stopped starting from the beginning. That was the first real change. For ten weeks every one of them had opened with the weather, or with the year he was born, because you soften it, because that is how we are raised. Now they arrive already halfway in.

And somewhere in the first week of Farvardin they stopped facing the same way.

I did not notice the night it happened. I noticed about four nights later, the way you notice that a fan you have heard for eighteen years has stopped.

They had turned round.

34.

HERE TO THE FLAT UPSTAIRS

No answer.

The woman upstairs stopped me on the stairs in Esfand and told me she had stopped dreaming about her son.

She said it the way you say a thing about the weather. She was carrying a bag of oranges and she put it down on the step because it was heavy, and she said she used to see him nearly every night, at his kitchen in Malmö, which she has never been to, and that he would be doing something ordinary at the counter. And that it had stopped around the New Year and had not come back.

She said: I think I have forgotten his face.

She said it without any drama at all. She said she still knows what he looks like in photographs, which is not the same thing, and then she picked the oranges up again and said the lift was still out.

I stood on that landing for a while after she had gone up.

Because that is the other half of it and I had not let myself write it down until she said it out loud on a staircase with her shopping. It is not only that the messages are stuck. *The dreaming stopped*. A woman of seventy has stopped being able to produce her own son in her own sleep, in her own head, in a country where nothing else was taken from her that week.

And the reason is a line in a file on the second floor of a building on Vali-Asr.

I have never told anybody this and I am not going to. There is no version of that sentence that is not a man asking to be forgiven by somebody who does not know there is anything to forgive.

35.

HERE TO A BUILDING IN KARAJ

By bus, two hours and ten minutes.

On the third of Esfand I went to Karaj.

I had the district and the street and the shape of the stairwell, and I had the runner on the floor, and I had seven voices. I got on a bus at Azadi terminal at seven in the morning with the book in my bag, and I found the building in about forty minutes, which frightened me more than not finding it would have.

I went up. I knocked. I had not decided what I was going to say and I want that recorded, because a man who has thought it through and still knocks is a different man from the one who was standing there.

A woman of about fifty opened the door.

It was her. I knew the voice before she had finished the second word. She is the one who starts with the hospital.

I said I had the wrong address.

She said which one was I looking for, and I said a number that does not exist in that building, and she said no, and then she said come in and have tea, because that is what you do, and I said no, and she said it again, and I went in.

There were nine of them in that flat. It was a Thursday. I knew four of those voices better than I know my brother's, and one of them was the man who says *azizam* at the start of every sentence, and he said it to me, twice, about the traffic on the Karaj road.

The photograph was on the shelf with a black ribbon across the corner. She had been dead since the second week of Dey.

I sat there for twenty minutes. I drank the tea. She asked if I wanted it sweet and I said as it comes. Somebody's child showed me a drawing of a bird.

I did not say anything.

I have been asked to keep things from people for eighteen years. I was good at it. I thought it was a thing I did at work.

36.

HERE TO THE DESK

No distance at all.

By the end of Esfand there were nineteen books.

They are the cheap squared ones, the kind you buy in packs of five outside a school, and I fill one in about nine days. I write the room. I write the hour if there is one. I write who was speaking and what they were trying to say, and where I think they are, and where I think the other one is, and then I put the date and I close it and I go to work.

It takes forty minutes and my hand hurts afterwards, which it has not done since school.

I understood what I was doing somewhere around the ninth book and it stopped me for a day. I am a man who spent eighteen years making sure that a thing said in one place arrives in another. That is the whole of my working life. And I had built, at a child's desk, at four in the morning, out of nineteen exercise books and a pen — *a network*. A very slow one. One hop. No delivery.

I am doing by hand what a machine did for nothing until the eighteenth of Dey.

And there is a second thing, which I have written down once, on the inside cover of the fourteenth book, and never again.

I am the only person alive who could count them.

Every family in there knows one. None of them can reach each other, so none of them can add them up, and outside this country nobody has anything at all, because nothing has come out since Dey. There is no list. There is no record. There is a state figure that a child could see through and there is a figure from abroad that is somebody's guess wearing a suit.

I have got something better than either and it is in nineteen exercise books in a cupboard in Tehranpars, and it was arrived at in my sleep by one man with no witnesses.

Which is not evidence. It is a symptom.

That is the thing they did, and I do not think they knew they were doing it. They did not stop the country from speaking. They stopped it from being able to prove that it had.

37.

HERE TO THE GATE

Under one millisecond.

He telephoned on the twenty-sixth of Esfand, in the evening, and he was kind to me.

I should be exact about that because it would be easier to write him the other way. He asked how the floor was holding up. He said he was aware it had been a long winter for the technical people. He said the arrangement was going to run for some time yet, and that there was no sense in anybody making himself ill over it, and that I should take some leave.

He meant it. He said, with your family, and left a space for me to say something about my family, and I did not, and he moved on politely.

Leave would have ended it. I had worked that out by then — that it only comes on the floor, in the cold, on the late rotation, and that two nights at my brother-in-law's in Amol had produced nothing at all, which was the quietest sleep I have had since Azar and which I could not stand.

So I had the thing in my hand, on a telephone, offered, by the only man in the arrangement who could give it to me.

I said I would think about it. He said of course. He said *zahmat keshidid* and thanked me and hung up.

I did not take it, and the reason is not a noble one and I am not going to make it into one.

If I stop, nobody hears them. Not one of them. Not the seven, not the girl at ninety-four, not the man with the ear. They do not go somewhere else when I am asleep in Amol. They do not get delivered by somebody better. They stay exactly where they are, which is nowhere, and they stay there quietly.

Being heard by one man is not much.

It is the whole difference between a thing that did not arrive and a thing that was never said.

38.

HERE TO THE MAN IN THE ROOM

No distance at all.

They started asking.

Not me, at first. The room. A question put to the air the way you put a question to the air in a waiting room — not expecting the room to answer, just needing it said out loud by somebody.

The first one was the woman from Karaj and it was not a complicated question. She said: why?

I want to be careful here, because there is a version of this that is a speech, and it was not a speech. She was not asking to be let through. She had stopped asking to be let through in Bahman. She wanted to know why a country would do this to its own, and she wanted it in the ordinary sense in which a person wants to know why the water has been off since Thursday.

And the room answered her, badly, the way a room does.

Somebody said it was politics. Somebody said it was the young ones. Somebody said a thing about foreigners that I am not going to write down. The man with the car said that when this was over, the first thing would be the car. The woman who is deciding about her nephew said a name, quietly, and then said it again louder.

Then the man with the weather — the one who does it properly, the one who does not cry — said the thing that took the floor out from under me. He said it mildly, the way an old man at the back of a room says a thing he has been turning over for some weeks.

He said: whoever does this has a mother.

Nobody argued with him. They went quiet, which they do not do.

He went on. He said that a man sits somewhere and closes a road, and then he goes home, and on the way home he buys bread. And

at some point in the evening somebody he loves telephones him, and it goes through. He said: it must go through. He said it would be a strange arrangement otherwise.

And then he asked the room what a man like that says at his own table. Not as an accusation. He asked it as a question of fact, in the same voice he uses to ask whether the boy is eating.

Somebody said such a man does not think about it.

The old man said he did not accept that. He said a person who has decided not to think about a thing is a person who has thought about it, and that he had spent his own life not thinking about several things, and had known the whole time exactly which ones they were.

It went round for a long while after that. It has gone round every night since. There is no side of it they have not had. One of them says it is a job and somebody has to do it, and somebody else says yes, and that is the whole problem in one sentence. One of them says they cannot be people, because a person could not. And the old man says no, they are people, that is the part I cannot get past, and if they were not people none of this would be worth saying out loud.

I have had that put to me every night since and I have never once answered it.

I could have. That is the part I keep returning to. I am the only person in that room who knows the answer, and it is not a grand answer.

I did not answer because I have one.

It is in the file. It is thirty characters long, it was approved on a Tuesday by five people who were not in the room, and it is correct, and it would have satisfied anybody who asked me in an official capacity, and several people have.

I said it out loud once, alone, in my own kitchen, to hear what it would sound like in a room full of people who had lost somebody.

It sounded like what it is.

IV. ELEVEN HOURS

39.

HERE TO ANYWHERE

No answer.

On the ninth of Esfand it went down again and this time it was not us.

I mean that literally rather than as an excuse. The instruction did not come through the man who telephones me. It came sideways, at midnight, through a channel we do not normally hear from, and it was not a request and there was no apology for the hour and nobody said *zahmat keshidid*, and the difference was so marked that I understood the situation from the tone before I understood it from the content.

What we had built over five weeks — the four hundred and sixty, the arrangement, the thing they called the new normal on the radio — came off in about forty minutes.

Back to a hundredth of what a country is.

The hospital stayed. I want that written down, because I put it there in Dey and it held through everything, and on the one or two occasions in my life when I have needed a reason to get out of the chair, that is the one I have used.

Everything else went. The banks went. Customs went. The place where the programmers keep their work went, and I know a man who lost fourteen years of his business in that hour and who has since gone to Oman.

The report for Esfand said ninety-nine point nine eight.

I looked at it for some time. It is not a lie. It has never once been a lie. The number is the health of the machines and the machines were in glorious health, humming in eighteen degrees, labelled at both ends, carrying nothing to nobody for the whole of the month.

40.

HERE TO THE WHOLE COUNTRY

One per cent.

The New Year happened inside it.

I set the table. I am not going to pretend otherwise: I put the seven things out, on the cloth, in the order my wife used to put them, and I sat down in front of them at the exact minute of the turn, alone, in a flat in Tehranpars, with a dark screen propped against a book because I had not put the book away since Yaldā.

There was no call. There had been no call for two months by then. I sat there anyway because the alternative was to admit that the arrangement was the arrangement.

In the stairwell afterwards people were doing what they could. The woman upstairs had cooked for nine and there were four. The boy from the fourth floor had got a message out somehow in the second week of Esfand and had been dining on it ever since, and he told the story three times that evening, and each time it was the same length.

Somebody's uncle said the thing everybody says, which is that it cannot go on.

It went on for another forty-one days.

I want to put down one small thing about that evening because it is the only funny thing in this whole account and it is not very funny. The building's change of year was decided by a wall clock in the lobby that has been seven minutes fast since 1398, and a man from the second floor who insisted his watch was right, and they argued about it, seriously, for a quarter of an hour, in a country where nobody could telephone anybody to ask.

We celebrated twice. Once on the clock and once on the watch.

41.

HERE TO A ROOM IN KARAJ

Thirteen weeks and six days.

The man is at work in Sweden and it is half past two in the afternoon and somebody is telling him.

It is not one of the seven. I know the seven.

It is a man of about forty-four with a flat voice, who begins the way the others begin, with the weather, because he has been listening to them do it for weeks and has learned it off them the way you learn a song off a wall. He says it has been mild. He says his knee has been bad, which is a lie, he does not have a bad knee, he has taken that from the man who says *azizam*.

Then he says it. He says it well. He gets the softening in.

And then he says something none of the seven has ever said, which is that he is sorry, and that he is sorry in a particular way, and that the reason none of this reached him in January is not an accident of the weather. I got up and stood in the kitchen with the light off for a long while.

I want to be accurate about what frightened me, because it was not that I had turned up in there. I had half expected that. It was that in the dream I was good at it. I had the cadence. I had the twenty seconds of weather and the arrival from the side. Weeks of listening to seven decent people do the hardest thing there is, and I had learned it, the way you learn anything you hear four hundred times.

I am a man who spent a winter carrying other people's messages and could not deliver one of them.

So I had started delivering one of my own.

42.

HERE TO A GOOD ADDRESS

Nine milliseconds.

In Farvardin they brought in the two speeds and that is the thing I would put in front of anybody who wants to understand what this actually was.

It was not a wall. A wall is at least the same for everybody. This was a tap, and somebody had to decide how far it turned for which house, and they gave that to me, and I did it, because by then I had stopped being able to locate the place where a man says no.

The better connection cost about three times the ordinary one and you could not simply buy it. You applied. You went in person with your papers. Your trade had to be one of the trades on the sheet, and your name had to come back clean from an office that is not mine, and you signed an undertaking about what you would and would not do with it, in your own hand, in a room, in front of somebody.

Doctors, yes. Exporters, yes. A man with a licence and a chamber card, yes.

A woman of seventy on the fifth floor with a son in Malmö is not a trade.

And the whole of it — the classes, the speeds, the list of who — sat inside a regulation whose title I am not going to reproduce here because I looked it up twice to be sure I had it right and I could not make myself believe it. It is named after helping businesses.

That is not irony. Nobody chose that name to be clever. Somebody chose it because it was the true description of the only part of the problem they were looking at.

43.

HERE TO TORONTO

Two hundred and fourteen milliseconds.

It took me until Ordibehesht to work out that the rule includes me. When I did, I sat down on the floor of the hall with the drawer open and stayed there a while.

The rule is that whatever hits a shut door piles up on the side it came from. I had been saying that about the country. Eighty million people reaching every evening at nine, down roads I closed, and all of it arriving at the man who closed them.

But I reach too.

Every night at nine I sit at that table in front of a screen that has been dark since the eighteenth of Dey, and I eat, and I look at it. And every night before I sleep I send the small thing to her building and read the number, and the number is two hundred and fourteen, and the house is there, and the road is there, and it carries nothing.

That is a door. I built it myself, out of a cheat, and I put it in my own hall.

So my reaching goes where everyone else's goes. It does not get to Toronto. It stops at the door and collects on my side of it, and at some point in the night it is handed back to me in the only form it can take, which is a young woman at a kitchen table with a cup that has a chip in the handle.

I am not being visited. I have not been visited once.

I am being returned to sender.

And that is why she is getting slower. There is nothing on the far side delaying; there is no far side. What I have been timing is how far a thing has to go now before it comes back carrying anything at all — and it goes further every week, because there is less and less of her left in me for it to reach.

Two hundred and fourteen. Nine hundred. Two seconds. Fourteen.

That is not a line getting worse. That is a man forgetting his daughter's face, measured to the thousandth of a second, by the only method he has ever known.

44.

HERE TO TORONTO

Fourteen seconds.

She is at the table. The window is on her left. She has the cup with the chip in the handle and she turns it so I can see the chip, the way she always does, and she has been doing it every time now, which she did not used to.

I say something.

Fourteen seconds.

She says, you look tired.

I say I am not tired, I am cold, the room at work is cold.

Fourteen seconds.

She says, you always say that.

I say her name.

Fourteen seconds. Then the light from the left, and the cup, and the chip turned toward me, and she says: you look tired. Nineteen pages of numbers in the back of the fourth book, and the line they make does not level off.

I knew by then what I was measuring. Knowing did not stop me measuring it.

I got up and went to the drawer and took out the ticket, which is four years old and is a piece of card, and I put it back under the fuses, and I went in to work.

45.

HERE TO THE LIST

No distance at all.

The idea arrived on a Tuesday, which is the day the board meets, and that is not a coincidence, it is the whole of it.

Everything I do goes to five people who are not in the room, a week in advance, with a reason in thirty characters. That is the rule and I have kept it for eighteen years and I have never once resented it.

But by Ordibehesht the board had been approving January retrospectively ever since. It had to; nothing that happened after the eighteenth of Dey came with a week's notice, and a board that will not approve what already happened is a board that stops the country, so it approved. Every Tuesday. In order. With the reasons I had written.

Which means the board was not a gate. It was a record.

And a record catches you afterwards.

I worked out that week what the actual exposure was, on paper, the way you work out anything. If I filed a change at nine on a Thursday night, nobody would look at it until the following Tuesday morning at the earliest. The floor would see it at the shift handover at eight, and the man on the other shift labels cables and does not read other people's changes, and the night supervisor signs the sheet without opening it and has done since 1399.

The realistic figure was somewhere between nine and fourteen hours before a person saw it.

Eleven, I decided, and that is the number I worked to, and it turned out to be right within about forty minutes, which after eighteen years in a building is not a clever guess, it is just knowing where you work.

46.

HERE TO A GREAT MANY PLACES

Pending.

Eleven hours does not empty a winter.

I want to be clear about the arithmetic because I have seen, since, how people would like this part to have gone, and the shape they want is a man opening a door and a country pouring through it, and that is not what was available.

What was available was an order.

That is what a queue is. When there is more than there is room for, something decides what goes first, and in every system I have ever worked on the something is a rule written by somebody who was thinking about throughput. Highest value first. Oldest first. Smallest first.

I sat down at the child's desk on the Wednesday with the books out, all twenty-six of them by then, and I did the only piece of authorship of my life.

The seven went first. The room in Karaj, the handset, the man at work in Sweden at half past two. Not because it was the oldest. Because there were seven of them and they had each been doing it alone since Dey and not one of them knew the others were there.

Then the girl at ninety-four out of a hundred, and I put the whole of her in, the nervous ninety seconds as well, because her mother in Kerman is going to get the smoothed version from her daughter for the rest of her life and this was the only chance anybody would ever have to give her the real one.

Then the man with the ear, and the name, and all four thousand times he said it.

Then the girl with her hand on the screen, and the grandmother who has been on hold since Dey.

Then two hundred and ninety more, in an order I decided at a desk between ten at night and four in the morning, on no principle that would survive being written down, using twenty-six exercise books

and everything I knew about people, which is not much and is more than nobody.

And then I went to the file and I took my own line off it.

The house in Toronto. Three lines, forty seconds, the same forty seconds in reverse. I needed the room and that was the room, and I am not going to dress that up either: it was the only thing in that whole winter that cost me anything, and it cost me about as much as a man can be asked for.

I filed it at twenty past nine on the Thursday. The reason field takes thirty characters.

I wrote: *routing correction*.

47.

HERE TO A GREAT MANY PLACES

Delivered.

It started at four minutes to ten.

I was on the floor. I had the graph up, which is a thing I have looked at every working day since 1385 and which I had not seen do anything at all since the ninth of Esfand.

It came up like water finding a crack. Not a surge — a thin line that went up and then kept going up, and at about ten past ten it left the top of the scale I had set and I had to change the scale, which is a thing you do perhaps twice in a career.

Across the country, in that hour, telephones that had been dead since the winter made their noise.

One each, mostly. That is what a winter in a queue comes to when it finally moves: one notification, in the dark, at ten o'clock on a Thursday night in Ordibehesht, in a flat where everybody had stopped looking at the handset months ago and had not stopped carrying it.

I sat on the second floor and watched the number and I knew what was happening in a great many rooms at once, and I was the only

person in the country who did, and I have never been so frightened of a thing I had done on purpose.

Because it is not good news. That is what I had not let myself think about until it was moving.

A man in Sweden found out that night that his mother died in Dey. Seven people told him inside about ninety seconds, seven different ways, all of them kind, all of them four months late — and the seven had long since given up and assumed he knew, so half of them were not even awake to answer him when he called back.

It arrived. That is all I can say for it. It arrived after it had stopped being news and become history, and the difference between those two things is the difference between being told something and being informed of it, and I gave two hundred and ninety-odd families the second one.

I did not put my line back. I watched the graph until four and I went home at six and I did not dream at all.

48.

HERE TO TORONTO

Four months.

I had thought of it as a cost.

That is how I had it in my head the whole way through: a man giving up one thing so that two hundred and ninety families could have theirs. I had been a little pleased with myself about it, in a way I am not going to defend.

It did not occur to me, at any point, on any of the nights I sat at that desk with the books out, that I had just closed a road.

It is the only thing I did that winter that I did not think through, and I know why. In eighteen years I have never once thought of my own house as a route. Four hundred and sixty of them on a list and mine was not on it, because mine is not a road, mine is where I live.

It is a road.

I took it off the file at twenty past nine on a Thursday, and the rule does not care whose it is, and eight days later my daughter arrived in the pile with four months behind her.

She had been making them since Dey and not sending them, because that is what everybody does. You make it anyway. Then the little circle turns and turns and you put the handset face down and you do the washing up.

She was in the room. That is what I mean when I say she arrived. Not a rectangle of light, not the table, not the cup with the chip in the handle. In the room, with the others, halfway into something, the way they all come now.

She was arguing with the man with the weather.

She did not know it was him. She did not know it was me. Nobody in that room knows anything. She was arguing the way you argue with a stranger on a long journey, out of tiredness and manners, and she was losing, and she was not going to stop.

He had asked his question. The one about the mother. And my daughter was telling him he had it wrong.

She said: they are not the ones who decide.

She said: my father does that work.

I am going to set down what she said as close as I can get it. I have had four months to get it right and I think this is right.

She said he is an engineer. She said he fixes things — that when something breaks he goes in at night and fixes it, that he has done it since before she was born, that the roads are roads and the men who look after roads are not the men who close them. She said it the way you say a thing you have never had to check.

Somebody asked her how she knew.

She said: because he told me.

That was her whole case. It is a good case. It is the one I gave her, over about twenty years, without once sitting down and deciding to. She has it because she was raised in my kitchen by a man who talks about work the way I talk about work, which is as weather — as a thing that happens to a building, and that he then attends to.

The room let it go. Not because she won. Because nobody in there can go and check, and because they are tired, and because she is somebody's daughter and they are somebody's parents, and there is a limit to what people will do to each other even there.

Then she stopped arguing, and said the thing she had actually been trying to send since Dey, which was not about any of that.

She has moved. The new place is nearer the laboratory. There is a bus that is supposed to come at ten past and does not.

There was a great deal more of it than that, four months of it, and I have not written the rest down and I am not going to. It is the only place in this account where I have kept something back on purpose, and I have thought about it and I am comfortable. Everybody else in these books is a stranger and I never asked one of them either. I have decided that the one person in here I am related to keeps hers.

She has never known she sent it. She still does not.

49.

HERE TO THE FLAT UPSTAIRS

Three, all from Dey.

The woman upstairs came down on the Friday morning at about eight, in her coat, holding the telephone in both hands the way she holds it.

She said three had come.

She read them to me on the step. The first was from the ninth of Dey and it says he is fine and the flat is cold and is she taking the tablets. The second is from the twelfth and it is one line asking whether she got the first. The third is from the fourteenth and it is four words.

Nothing after the fourteenth of Dey.

She did not notice. She was happy — she read them twice and the second time she did the voice, which is what people do, and she

said he sounds well, and she said he has always been like that about the heating.

I stood there and did the arithmetic that she had not done and will do in about a week, which is this: her son stopped trying on the fourteenth of Dey. Six days. He sent three, and then he worked out that nothing was going, and he stopped, and he has not tried since — and what she has in her hand is not three messages, it is the exact date on which her child gave up on reaching her.

She will see it. There is no version of the next month in which she does not see it.

She asked whether more would come. I said I did not know. That was the first true thing I had said to her since Dey and it was true only by the narrowest possible margin, because by eight that morning it had been off again for four hours.

She said, thank you, *āqā-ye mohandes*.

Nothing was lost.

50.

HERE TO THE CHANGE BOARD

Tuesday, as always.

It was rolled back at nine minutes past nine on the Friday morning by a man at another site who noticed an unusual profile and did the correct thing, which was to revert an unscheduled change and raise a note.

Eleven hours and fifteen minutes.

The note went to the board. The board met on the Tuesday. I was not asked to attend and there was no reason for me to attend, because the change had been filed properly, with a reason, in the correct field, and had been reverted properly, and both of those things were recorded, and that is what the board is for.

It is minuted as an unscheduled routing correction, applied in error, reverted without customer impact.

Without customer impact. I have thought about that phrase more than any other in this account. It is not a lie either. The form has a drop-down and the largest option in it is *Major, over ten thousand*, and the smallest is *None*, and there is no option on that form for what happened that night, because the form was written by people designing for the case where something breaks.

Nobody spoke to me about it. Nobody has ever spoken to me about it. In Khordad the order came down from the top of the country and the arrangement was partly lifted, in stages, by profession, with the short messages first and then the ones that are ours and then, for some people, a little of the rest, and men who wanted it kept went to a court about it, and none of that had anything to do with me and none of it delivered one line of what is still in there.

The rest of the queue is still in there. It was in there yesterday.

I check.

51.

HERE TO TORONTO

Two hundred and nine milliseconds.

I got a line in the middle of Khordad.

Not as a favour and not by cheating. The tiering had reached the technical grades by then and there was a form, and I filled it in, and it took nine days, and a man I have never met signed something in an office I have never been to. It is the only part of this whole account where the arrangement worked the way people outside imagine arrangements work.

I did not use it for four days.

Then on a Thursday evening at about nine, because nine was the time, I sat down at the kitchen table in front of the screen with the dish of nothing in front of me, and I called my daughter.

Two hundred and nine milliseconds. I looked at it while it was ringing. Two hundred and fourteen was the number for four years and two hundred and nine is the same number; the route had

changed somewhere, that is all, and a man who did not know what he was looking at would have said it was fine.

It was fine.

She answered on the fourth ring. She was in a corridor somewhere with her coat on and she said *bābā* and then she said hold on, and there was a noise, and then she was outside.

We spoke for five minutes.

She has moved. The new place is nearer the laboratory and there is a bus that is supposed to come at ten past and does not. I had already heard about the bus. The woman at the laboratory has been promoted and is worse. It has been raining for nine days. She asked whether I had been eating and I said yes and she made the noise she makes, and she asked what I had been doing and I said work, which was true, and which is the largest lie I have ever told anybody.

She was well. She had been well the whole time. She said she had been worried in Dey and then she had got used to it, which is what people do, and she said it in the tone you use for a thing that is over.

She had to go. The bus. She said she would call on Friday.

I sat there afterwards for a long time with the screen still on.

I had been ready for her to be dead. I had gone over that. I had been ready for her to have stopped trying, which I had decided would be worse, and I had gone over that too, many times, at four in the morning, at a child's desk.

I had not prepared anything at all for her being fine. That was four months ago. She calls on Fridays. I know about the bus and the woman at the laboratory and a man on her course who will not stop explaining things, and it is all exactly the same as it was before Dey, and the number is two hundred and nine, and there is no loss on the line at all.

I have not dreamt about her once.

I want to be careful here because this is the place where a man in my position starts to make himself interesting, and I am not

interesting. I am a man who stopped having a particular kind of dream in the same week that he took a line off a list, and I have no way of telling which of those two things caused the other, or whether either did.

What I can say is what it is like, and it is this.

I have my daughter back on Fridays and I do not have her.

For four years she was a rectangle of light on this table and I never once thought that was strange. I thought the rectangle was her. And somewhere in that winter I found out that it was not, and I found out by having something better than the rectangle for about fourteen weeks, at two hundred milliseconds and then at nine hundred and then at fourteen seconds, degrading the whole time, and I did not understand until it stopped that the degrading thing was the only place she had ever been an actual person to me rather than a good connection.

All winter I read two hundred and fourteen off that house, every night, and the night she picked up it was two hundred and nine, and there is no difference between those two numbers worth a man's attention. The road was never what was wrong with this. The road was perfect the entire time.

She is fine. The line is fine. Everything measures fine.

That is not the same as her coming back, and I have no instrument that tells the difference, and neither has anybody else.

52.

HERE TO TORONTO

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There are forty-one books now. They are in the cupboard in the hall, in two stacks, with the dates on the spines in marker, and they are the only complete record that exists of what this country did not manage to say to itself between Dey and Khordad of that year.

They are in my handwriting. They were arrived at in my sleep. There is no second witness and there never was and there is not going to be one.

I have thought about what to do with them and I have got nowhere, and I want to set down exactly why, because it is not cowardice, or not only.

I could not send them anywhere all winter, which is the joke, and I can send them now, and the problem has not changed at all. A man with forty-one exercise books full of strangers' last words, who cannot say where he got them, is not a witness. He is a symptom. Every route I have thought of ends with a person being kind to me in the way you are kind to somebody who has brought you something that cannot be checked.

I built a network and it has one hop and no delivery, and I am both ends of it.

So they stay in the cupboard, and I keep filling them, because it has not stopped. It slowed in Khordad and it has not stopped. Two or three a week now. Last night it was a man trying to reach a brother about a car, of all things, about who is to have the car, and it has been going on since Bahman and neither of them will give way.

I took the ticket out of the drawer in Tir and looked at it, and the dates on it are four years old and it is a piece of card, and I put it back under the fuses where it has always been.

I have not dreamt about her since the line came back in Khordad. Not once, in four months, and I have gone in looking, on the floor, in the cold, on the late rotation, and there is nothing, and the nothing is exactly the same nothing I would get if she had never existed and exactly the same nothing I would get if she were perfectly well and busy and thinking about something else.

That is the thing about this work that I could have told anybody on my first day and did not understand until I was forty-four years old. A thing that does not come back does not tell you why.

Nothing was lost. Everything is still there. It is all still there and it is all still in the same place, and the only way I know of to find out whether anybody is on the other side of a road is to send something small and count.

Here to Toronto.

GLOSSARY

Ājil [aa-JEEL] — Persian, *mixed nuts and dried fruit*. What goes on the table for a gathering, and without which the longest night of the year has not properly been kept.

Āqā-ye mohandes [AA-ghaa-ye mo-han-DES] — Persian, *Mr Engineer*. The ordinary way to address a man with a technical qualification, used by neighbours and strangers alike, and carrying respect without warmth.

Azar [aa-ZAR] — the ninth month of the Solar Hijri year, running through late November and December.

Azizam [a-zee-ZAM] — Persian, *my dear*. Placed at the start of a sentence rather than the end, and used between grown men without embarrassment.

Bābā [baa-BAA] — Persian, *dad*. What a grown daughter still calls her father, and the only name he is called by anyone in this book.

Bahman [bah-MAN] — the eleventh month, running through late January and February.

Dey [DAY] — the tenth month, running through late December and January. The middle of winter.

Esfand [es-FAND] — the twelfth and last month, running through late February and March.

Farvardin [far-var-DEEN] — the first month, beginning at the spring equinox and carrying the New Year.

Khordad [khor-DAAD] — the third month, running through late May and June.

Ordibehesht [or-dee-be-HESHT] — the second month, running through late April and May.

Raft-o bargasht [raft-o bar-GASHT] — Persian, *going and coming back*. A return ticket. Also, in the narrator's trade, the time a signal takes to reach a distant machine and come home again, which is the only measurement he has ever fully trusted.

Shab-e Yaldā [shab-e yal-DAA] — Persian, *the night of Yaldā*. The longest night of the year, on the thirtieth of Azar, stayed awake through until dawn with family, pomegranates, dried fruit and the reading of Hafez.

Tir [TEER] — the fourth month, running through late June and July. High summer.

Zahmat keshidid [zah-MAT ke-shee-DEED] — Persian, *you have taken trouble*. Said in thanks to somebody who has gone out of their way for you, and equally to a man who has carried your suitcase.

Peyman checks the roads. He has done it for eighteen years: send something small, let it touch the far end, count how long it takes to come home.

On the eighteenth of Dey he helps take his country off the map. Then he is asked which things must keep working, and he makes that list himself. The hospital. The dialysis unit. The ambulances. The banks. Nobody above him ever reads it.

In the second week he adds one address that has no business being on it. It is a house in Toronto where his daughter lives. It takes forty seconds, and it cannot carry a word.

Then the dreams begin, and they are not his. A woman telling her son for the ninth time that his mother has died. A recording that stops at ninety-four out of a hundred. An old man holding a grandson he has never held.

Nobody stopped talking. A country goes on reaching every night, and all of it has to go somewhere.

*Nothing was lost.
That is the trouble with it.*



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