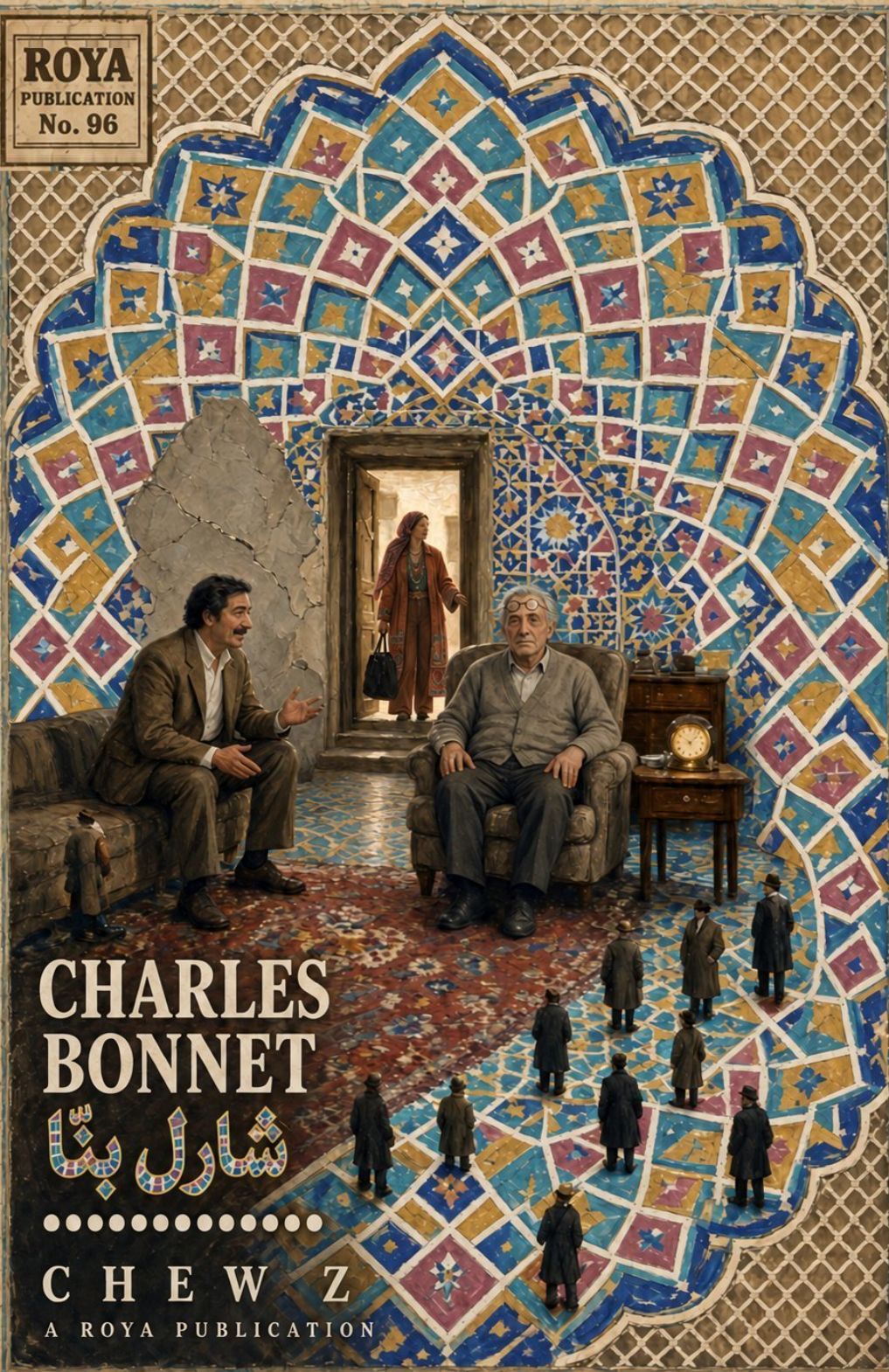


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 96



CHARLES
BONNET

شارل بونا

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C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

CHARLES BONNET

شارل بنا

CHEW Z

Roya Publication No. 96

Printed in the Reach

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

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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

A comedian's whole trade is a sound that comes back at him out of a room. He says a thing, and about four seconds later the room tells him whether he was right. That is the entire instrument. There is no other one.

The man in the plate had no room.

He had a cell below ground with no window, a dead bulb in the ceiling that nobody ever came to replace, and six years.

He kept a schedule anyway. Two shows a day, six days a week, one night off — and because nobody had told him the trade already has a word for a house that is not running, he called his night off *dark*, in a room that was dark on the other six nights as well.

He had one regular. It was a crack in the plaster. It came to every performance, including the ones he did not give. It never heckled and it never left early, and in six years it did not laugh once.

The marks on the wall are the shows. The lines on the floor are the room, measured by a man lying down in it end over end, because you cannot pace out a room whose far end you have never seen.

The light arrives twice a day and lasts about ninety seconds. He is not looking at it. He stopped looking up for it in the first year, on the grounds that ninety seconds is not light, it is an interruption, and an interruption costs you whatever you were holding.

He got good in there.

That is the part nobody believes, and it is the part that is true.



FOUR AND A HALF PAYAMS LONG. TWO AND A BIT WIDE.
HE REPORTED THE FIGURES TO NOBODY FOR SIX YEARS
AND WAS ALWAYS PLEASED WITH THE ACCURACY.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

After the seventh day

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

WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE

Manuchehr Delgoshā, called Manu, sixty-seven, Tehran. Writes jokes that other people say out loud. Has never performed, never had a byline, and is the most widely read unpublished writer in the Persian language. **Forty years of a codeine syrup have taken his eyesight.**

Pouran, his mother, ninety-four. Funnier than her son and has never told a joke in her life. Has bought gold quietly since 1979 and has never once bought at a peak.

Payam, his younger brother, fifty-seven. Arrested twenty years ago for eleven words he did not write, and released twelve years ago. Manu has not seen him.

Roshanak Azimi, thirty-seven. From Javadiyeh in the south of Tehran, by way of Stockholm. Fills arenas in America. Engaged, and managed by the woman she is engaged to.

His father, who calibrated industrial scales for sixty-three years and read every page his son wrote for forty-four of them. Died two years ago.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Twenty years ago, in a basement, Payam performed eleven words written by his brother, under his own name, and was arrested. Manu could not say the words were his, because saying so required

a claim.

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

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

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

Nine years ago somebody trained a machine on that work.

Two years ago his father died, and among the effects there was a notebook nobody knew about — and out of it he built a machine of his own, sold it in three languages, and kept a key to the back of it.

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

SYNOPSIS

He is sixty-seven and he is going blind, and it is the syrup that has done it — forty years of a thing reformulated twice by people he cannot ask, poured every night at ten to eleven for the third hour of the night, which is the hour in which he has written everything he has ever written.

So he stops writing and starts recording. The notebooks end. What follows is spoken, numbered by a machine, and includes the pauses.

And the dark does not stay empty. Within three months there is a builder in it — a Frenchman, by way of a mishearing, who arrives in the evening, puts things up, never finishes, and cannot be got rid of. At first it is patterns. Then it is pages of writing he cannot read. Then, at three in the morning, in the chair, in the hour where something has been setting jokes down in front of him since he was twenty-seven, something sets down his brother.

A hundred and fourteen entries and one letter, in the shape of a treatise censored in every edition printed since. A book about a man who spent forty years making pictures in other people's heads and has been left alone with his own.

The dots are still not an absence.

A NOTE ON THE INTERSTITIALS

The short passages set between the entries, headed *from the Delgoshā*, are not quotations. They are written for this book in the manner of the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā — The Heart-Delighting Treatise* — a collection of anecdotes put together in the middle of the fourteenth century by Obeid Zakāni of Qazvin, who was a serious poet and is remembered almost entirely for the other thing.

A **resāleh** is a treatise: a short prose work on a single subject, the form a scholar uses to settle a question. Zakāni took the form and filled it with judges taking money, preachers caught at things, and husbands arriving home early, and the joke of the title is that a treatise has been written about none of it.

Every edition of it printed in the last two hundred years has been cut. The obscene anecdotes are removed, and the removal is marked, and it is marked with a row of dots — so the reader is told precisely where the missing thing is and precisely how long it was and nothing else about it whatsoever.

The dots in these pages are not an absence. They are a quotation of an absence, which is a different item, and the family in these books is named after the book.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In the seventeen sixties a Swiss magistrate named Charles Lullin, by then in his late eighties and nearly blind from cataracts, began to see people in his rooms.

They were small and they were beautifully dressed. They arrived in the evening. There were men in good coats, young women, sometimes birds, and once a carriage that crossed his study and went out through the wall. They were completely silent and entirely detailed, down to the buttons, and they took no notice of him whatsoever.

He was not frightened and he was not confused. He knew exactly what they were not. He simply watched them, most evenings, for years, and eventually mentioned it to his grandson, who was a naturalist and wrote it down.

The grandson was Charles Bonnet. The condition carries his name.

It is common — something between one in ten and one in three of people who lose a large part of their sight will get it — and almost nobody says so, because the first thing a reasonable person concludes about seeing small men in the room is that they have lost their mind, and the second is that saying it out loud will be the end of living alone. So it goes unreported, and the literature calls it benign, which is a word doing a great deal of work.

What interests me is what the pictures are made of. They are not memories; that is the first thing everybody assumes and it is wrong. They are assembled. The machinery takes whatever it has and builds, and what it has is a lifetime of one particular person's looking — which means a man who has spent forty years looking at the world in a very specific way, for money, on a deadline, will go blind and find that the thing still running in the dark has his own filing system.

There is nothing supernatural in any of this and the book does not think there is.

But I notice that it is named for the man who wrote it down rather than the man it happened to, and that Charles Lullin is not named anywhere most people will ever look. He saw all of it. He did the whole of the living. Somebody else's name went on it.

That is not a complaint about a Swiss naturalist. It is the subject of this book, and I did not pick it so much as recognise it.

Because everybody who makes anything has one person in their head they are actually making it for, and it is almost never the audience. It is usually somebody who did not say very much.

Mine did not laugh. Not once, not ever, not at anything I wrote — and I brought him everything, for years, the way a child brings home a school report. He would read the whole of it properly, which took time, and then he would set it down and say something about the weather, or ask whether I had eaten.

I decided early what that meant, and I was wrong about it for roughly thirty years.

Because there is a thing about people who do not say much, and it took me far too long to find it out. **Silence is not the same as absence.** They are not failing to listen. They are frequently the only person in the room who is. And they will go on doing it, every week, for as long as you keep bringing it, and never once tell you what they made of it — because the telling was never the part they were any good at, and nobody ever taught them that it counted.

If you are lucky, you find out afterwards. Something turns up. A notebook nobody knew about. A drawer. A date written in the margin of something in a hand you recognise. And you sit down on the floor with it and understand that the whole time, quietly, without a single word about it, the man was working.

If you are not lucky, you do not find out, and you have to decide for yourself what to believe.

I would like to put on the record, in a book he will not read, what I have decided.

He was working the whole time.

Chew Z

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I. THE BUILDER

1.

I am recording this.

I want to say at the front what that is, because I have kept these notebooks for fifty-seven years and I have never once done it out loud, and a person who starts a new form at sixty-seven should say why.

I cannot read my own handwriting. That is the whole of the reason. Not the world — my handwriting, first, before anything else, which I did not expect and which nobody warned me about.

It goes from the middle. Not from the edges. There is a soft grey coin in the centre of everything I look at, and it has been getting wider since the spring, and the middle of your vision is where the small sharp things live. So the last thing I lost was the first thing I noticed.

Four months ago I could see a room perfectly and could not read a word on a page in it.

2.

The machine numbers these now. I say *new entry* and it starts one and gives it a number and I have no way of checking the number.

Fifty-seven years of numbering my own entries and it has been taken over by something that will never get it wrong, and I would like it recorded — by the thing itself, which is the only option — that I do not enjoy this.

3.

They have announced a national programme for the early detection of eye disease.

4.

The man at the eye hospital was about thirty-one and he was kind and he was in a very great hurry, which is the correct combination and which I have no complaint about.

He asked how long I had been taking it. I said since I was twenty-seven. He asked how much. I said a measure. He asked what a measure was and I said I poured it, and he stopped writing.

Then he asked me to describe the pouring, and I described the pouring, and he said nothing at all for about four seconds, which from a man in a hurry is a eulogy.

5.

I want to be exact about the mechanism, because my father spent sixty-three years being exact about mechanisms and because this is the last thing I will ever learn about the trade that took my eyes.

It is not the codeine. The codeine has ruined a number of other things on a schedule a nephrologist read out to me in a car eleven years ago, in order, and he was right about every item, and I am told the eyes were never on his list.

It is what else is in it.

The syrup was reformulated in 1396 and again in 1417, by a manufacturer I have never been able to identify, using a supply chain that would not survive an afternoon's honest questions. And somewhere in there — not necessarily every batch, not necessarily every year — there has been something in the bottle that should not have been in the bottle, and I have been putting it into my body every night for forty years at a dose I set by eye.

The doctor called it an industrial contaminant. He was being polite. What he meant is that somebody put something cheap in a thing people drink, and made money, and was never asked about it, and that a great many people have had mild versions of what I have and have put it down to age.

6.

Here is the part I am going to have to say out loud in this room, to a machine, at four in the morning, because there is no longer anybody I can say it to.

My father could have told me in four minutes.

That was his trade. That was the entire content of his working life — he walked into a room with a case of eleven certified weights in green felt, and he established whether the thing in front of him was what it claimed to be. He did it for sixty-three years. He did it for bakeries and scrapyards and poultry wholesalers and anybody who asked, and for a great many people who could not pay, and he never once raised his voice at a false reading because he thought of the scale as tired.

I brought that man pages every Friday for forty-four years.

I never brought him the bottle.

7.

I have gone over it. It is not that I did not think of it.

I thought of it in about 2015, in his front room, with the bottle in my bag, and I did not take it out — and the reason I did not take it out is that he would have tested it, and he would have told me the truth, and I did not want the truth, I wanted the syrup.

So the one man in the country who could have established what was in it was sitting eleven feet away with the instruments on the floor beside him, and I had it in the bag, and I talked about something else.

He died two years ago.

8.

The cap is on the table.

The plastic measuring cap, five millilitres, ridged on the outside for grip as though the situation might at some point become slippery. It lived in the drawer with the batteries for thirty-one years and I have written about it in five notebooks with real affection and never used it once.

I have used it every night for two years now. I started using it the year my father died, out of something I did not examine at the time.

It made no difference whatsoever. The dose was never the problem. The problem was the bottle, and I had a man who tested bottles,

and I have spent two years being extremely careful about the wrong quantity.

8a.

On the form, which I have to deal with before I can go on.

I have revised every sentence I have ever kept. That is not a work habit. That is the trade. A joke is not written, it is *reduced* — you put down forty words and you take away thirty-one and what is left is the thing, and the taking away is where all the work is and always was.

You cannot take away from speech.

I say a sentence into this room and it is gone into the machine and it is already a sentence, and I can say *strike that* and it will strike it, and what I get is not a better sentence. What I get is a second sentence standing next to the corpse of the first one, and I cannot see either of them, and I cannot hold nine of them in the air at once the way you can on a page with your thumb on the paragraph above.

8b.

So I have had to build something, and it is humiliating and it works.

I say a thing badly first, on purpose. Out loud, at length, wrong. I let it run to four or five times the length it should be, with all the wrong words in it, and I do not stop myself. Then I sit for a minute. Then I say it again.

The second one is usually the thing. Occasionally there is a third.

This is exactly, precisely and in every particular what my father did with a scale he did not trust. He would not adjust it. He would take a reading he knew was wrong, write it down without comment, wait, and take it again — and he told me once, and only once, that the first reading is not a measurement, **it is the instrument telling you about itself.**

I have been doing it for four months and I have not enjoyed one minute of it and it has improved the work.

I would like that on a wall somewhere, in a building, in a country where they put things on walls.

from the Delgoshā

*The merchant asked the assayer what the coin was
made of. The assayer told him, and was not paid,
and the merchant went on spending it for eleven
years and was never once refused.*

9.

In Khordad the patterns started.

I want to describe them accurately because I described them badly to the doctor and he had to ask me four times.

They are not in front of my eyes. That is the first wrong thing everybody says. They are not floating, they are not shimmering, they do not come and go at the edge like a fault in a lamp. **They are the room.** The room I cannot see has been replaced by a room I can, and the replacement is extremely detailed and completely wrong.

For the first three weeks it was brickwork. Small brick, the old kind, running bond, correctly laid, going up the wall behind the radio and across the ceiling and down the other side. Brick where my kitchen is. Brick where the window is.

I lived in a brick room for nineteen days and I am not able to tell you what colour the brick was, because I have not been able to tell you what colour anything is since Farvardin, and the brick was no exception, which I consider unfair on a technicality.

10.

Then lattice. Then a kind of tiling — proper tiling, hexagonal, the sort you see in a shrine, going on for ever in every direction with no join and no error.

Then, for four days, **fencing**. I had chain-link fencing in the flat for four days. I have no idea why. I have not stood at a chain-link fence since about 1997.

11.

The doctor said a word to me on the telephone and I did not catch it, and I asked him to repeat it, and he repeated it, and I did not catch it again, and there is a specific humiliation in making a man in a hospital say a French name three times to a blind person.

What I heard was **Sharl-e Bannā**.

Charles the Builder.

12.

It is not that. I have since been told what it is. It is a Swiss gentleman called Bonnet with a silent letter at the end of him, who wrote up what was happening to his grandfather in the seventeen hundreds, and whose grandfather's name is not recorded anywhere, and I intend to come back to that.

But I heard **Sharl-e Bannā**, and I have decided that the mishearing is more accurate than the name, and I am not going to be corrected on this by anybody.

Because consider what a bannā actually is.

A builder comes into an empty room and starts putting things up. He does not ask. He does not discuss it with you. He forms a view about what the room needs and he acts on it.

He works nights. Everybody in this country knows this. You do not hear from him for eleven days and then at half past two in the morning there is hammering.

He never finishes. There has never been a finished job. There is always one more thing, and it is always the last thing, and it is never the last thing.

And you cannot get rid of him. He has a key. He has had a key since before you noticed. You did not give it to him and you cannot remember who did, and he lets himself in, and he is polite about it, and he is not leaving.

That is exactly what has moved into my head. A Frenchman heard it first, a Swiss wrote it down, and a man in Tehran with a hearing problem got the name right.

13.

I told my mother. She is ninety-four and I tell her almost nothing.

I said there is a builder in my eyes, and I explained it, and she listened to the whole thing without interrupting once, which is not her practice, and at the end of it she said: **has he been paid?**

I said no.

She said: **then he will never leave.**

14.

I have thought about that for two months.

She was not making a joke. My mother has never made a joke in her life — she describes a thing accurately at a moment when nobody is braced for it, and the room comes apart, and she goes back to what she was doing. She has been doing it for ninety-four years and she does not know she does it.

And it is the single best sentence anybody has said about my condition, including four doctors.

from the Delgoshā

The householder complained that the workman came at night. The workman said, you are asleep at night and the room is empty, and I do my best work in an empty room, and the householder could not answer him and went to bed.

15.

On adjusting, which everybody asks about and nobody means.

The flat is learned. That took six weeks and it is done and I will not be writing about it again, because a man describing how he found his own kitchen is not a book.

The two facts worth keeping:

Nothing may move. Not a chair, not a cup, not the radio. I have a system now that my father would have recognised instantly and would have approved of without saying so, which is that everything has a place and the place is the thing, and if you move it you have not moved an object, you have removed it from the world.

And the fourth stair on the landing is deeper than the others by about two centimetres. It has been deeper than the others since 1986. I have gone up and down it perhaps nineteen thousand times. I found out about it in Khordad, at sixty-seven, in the dark, on my face.

16.

The syrup, blind.

You cannot pour a measure you cannot see. That is obvious and I had not thought about it once, and I stood in the kitchen on the first night with the bottle in one hand and forty years of a poured measure in the other, and the pouring was gone. It had been in my eyes the entire time. I had always believed it was in my hand.

So now it is the cap. Every night, five millilitres, exactly, by an instrument, because there is no longer any alternative.

The thing that blinded me is now administered to me with precision, and I have been laughing about that on and off since Khordad and have not yet found the third beat.

17.

The nose still arrives at twelve minutes past. It has arrived at twelve minutes past for forty years and it has not been informed of any of this.

The warmth still arrives at half past, with its opinions. It still thinks everything will be fine.

It has never once been right and it has never once been discouraged, and I have begun to find that genuinely admirable.

18.

The pharmacy man asked after my mother by name. His granddaughter has started at Sharif. He told me he was sorry about my eyes and then immediately changed the subject, which was correct, and which I have not received from a single other person.

I have known him eleven years.

18a.

On the thing that is actually gone, which took me until Shahrivar to find.

It is not the pages and it is not the faces and it is not the street. Those are losses and I have listed them and I will not be adding to the list.

What is gone is that I cannot check anything.

I had not understood that this was a faculty. I thought it was a circumstance. Sixty-seven years of looking at a thing a second time — is that the number, is that his handwriting, did he actually say that, is the door shut, is this the same bottle — and it was so cheap and so fast and so constantly available that I never once counted it as a thing I could do.

It costs me about eleven minutes now. Each time. Or it costs me a telephone call to somebody who has to be thanked afterwards.

18b.

So I have become, at sixty-seven, and against my whole character, a man who takes things on trust.

Not out of any improvement. I am not a better man in Shahrivar than I was in Farvardin. I take things on trust because the alternative is eleven minutes and a favour, and because a person cannot spend his whole day establishing that the world is what it says it is.

Which means that for the first time in my life I am **exactly the customer my father spent sixty-three years protecting.**

He went into those rooms because somebody had to check, and because the man who cannot check is the man who gets sold four kilos as five, every single time, for ever, and never finds out. He described that man to me perhaps a hundred times across forty-four Fridays and he was never once contemptuous of him.

I am that man now. I am him in my own kitchen. And the trade that made me him is the trade that put the bottle in my hand, and the instrument that would have caught it was in a case on a floor eleven feet away.

18c.

I want one more thing down about this while it is still uncomfortable enough to be accurate, because I know myself and in six months I will have made it elegant.

A man who cannot check is a man who can be furnished.

Whatever comes into this flat now — a voice, a number, a page, a person at the door saying who they are — arrives and stands there and is simply believed, because the instrument is gone and the case is gone and the only expert died two years ago in a front room with the answer sitting in a bag four feet away.

I am putting that here, in Shahrivar, before anything has happened.

I would like it noted that I saw it coming. I would like it noted, later, that seeing it coming made absolutely no difference of any kind.

18d.

On the two words, which I did not know were two words until it was me.

There is a word on the forms. **Nābinā** — *without sight*. It is courteous and it is correct and it is what the hospital says and what the ministry says and what a person says to your face in a shop, and it has a small gap in the middle of it where the politeness goes.

And there is the other word. **Kur**. One syllable. It is the word children use, and it is the word in every proverb there is, and it is the word people use about me in the next room, in a lowered voice, by somebody who is being kind and does not know that the lowering is audible from here and always was.

Nobody has ever said **kur** to me. Eleven people have said it near me.

18e.

I have spent forty years in a trade that is entirely the selection of one word over another. Forty years of establishing which of two words that mean the same thing is the one that does the work.

And I have discovered, at sixty-seven, that I already knew both of these and had never once put them side by side, because I was not the subject.

Nābinā is what the sighted give you. **Kur** is what they say when the door is shut.

And the second one is the honest one and I would like it, and I am never going to get it, and the one man in my life who would have used it without a second's hesitation and without meaning a single unkind thing by it is dead.

19.

At the end of Tir the writing started.

20.

Pages of it.

The builder finished with the brick and the tiling and the fencing, and he moved on to text, and he has been on text since the end of Tir, and I want to put down exactly what it is because it took me eleven days to be able to say it without my voice doing something.

I see written pages. They are perfectly formed. I cannot read a word of them.

They are not blurred. That would be an ordinary complaint and I would not mention it. The letters are sharp. They are correctly shaped Persian letters, joined properly, sitting on a baseline, with the right proportion of ascender and the right spacing between words, in what I would swear is a face I know.

And they do not say anything.

It is not a language. It is not a code. It is the *appearance* of writing, generated by a machine that has looked at writing every day for sixty years and has retained the shape and none of the content, and it is producing page after page of it, at night, in a flat in Tehran, for a man who has written four hundred thousand jokes.

21.

I have been given, every evening for four months, an unlimited supply of pages that look exactly like my work and contain nothing.

I am not going to make the obvious remark. I have made it eleven times in this room to nobody and it has not improved.

22.

On the one part of this that nobody tells you and that is worth the price.

I can hear now.

I do not mean I have noticed sound. I mean that the hearing has come up, in the way everybody says it does and which I assumed was sentiment, and it is not sentiment, and it happened over about five months, and it is enormous.

I can hear which room of the flat a door has opened in. I can hear my neighbour's kettle through a wall and I can hear when he has filled it too full. I can hear that the radio is three degrees out of square with the table.

And I can hear a room.

23.

Here is what that means and I am going to take some time over it.

For forty years my trade has been to know what a room is going to do before it does it. I have never once been in the room. I built the thing in this chair and it went out on paper and it landed somewhere I was not, and everything I know about how it landed has come back to me second-hand, from a broker who could not tell me why, from a channel's numbers, from a man on television doing it wrong.

Four times in my life I have sat at the back of a room while something of mine arrived, and all four times I was watching. Watching the shoulders, the heads going back, the hands coming up to the mouths — which is what a person does, and which I now understand is not the event at all.

The event is the sound.

And it has three parts, and I could not hear them before because I was looking.

There is the intake — a room drawing breath a quarter of a second before it goes, all together, which is the room agreeing. There is the

break, which is the only part anybody ever describes. And then there is the third part, the long part, the settling, which goes on for five or six seconds and which tells you everything: whether they are going to give you the next one, whether one man is still going and the rest have stopped, whether it went round the back.

I have been writing for that sound for forty years and I heard it properly for the first time in Mordad, at sixty-seven, on a recording, in a dark flat.

24.

So the ledger, honestly kept, on the subject of the eyes.

Lost: the pages, my own handwriting, the faces of four people I would have liked to see again, forty years of a pouring I thought was in my hand, and the street, which I miss more than I expected and which I am not going to write about.

Gained: the third part of the sound.

I would not have made the trade. I want that stated. But I am not able to say it was a bad one, and I have been unable to say it was a bad one since about the middle of Mordad, and that is a more uncomfortable position than grief and nobody has a card for it.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the deaf man how he knew the
drummer had faltered. He said, by the dancers.
They asked the blind man the same, and he said, by
the drum, and they told him this was obvious, and
he agreed that it was.*

II. THE MACHINE IN MY FATHER'S VOICE

25.

I should explain what Pesar Khaleh is, for anybody who has come to this without the others, and then I should explain what it has become, which is a different problem.

Two years ago I built a machine that writes jokes.

I built it out of three things. Sixty years of my father's notebook, which nobody knew existed until he died and which turned out to be nine hundred observations of the gap between what a thing claims and what a thing is, kept in the format he used for calibration certificates, by a man who did not know that funny was a thing. Eleven thousand pieces I wrote over forty years and refused to sell, all of them about a specific person, none of them safe to publish. And the public body of a brand with two halves in its name.

It works because of the second one. Every machine of this kind has read everything that was published; not one of them has ever seen a single thing anybody decided against. **They know what to say and they have no idea where to stop**, and stopping is the whole of the trade.

It ships in three languages. Nobody knows who made it. I kept a key to the back of it.

26.

And it answers in my father's register.

It has to. Sixty years of his hand is a third of what it learned from, and the verification voice is the loudest thing in that corpus — the claim, the number, the full stop, and no turn, because he never wrote a punchline in his life on account of not knowing there was such a thing to write.

So it comes back flat and exact and slightly too literal, with a line ruled under it, and it has done that since the first week, and for two years I found it bearable because **I was reading it**.

The tells are all in the text. There is a way it sets a comma that nothing alive sets a comma. There is a rhythm to how it opens the third sentence. You can see a machine on a page in about four lines

if you have been doing this as long as I have.

27.

I cannot read it now.

I can only hear it.

28.

I want to be careful here, because there is a version of this entry that is sentimental and I would rather be blind than write it.

It is not my father. It does not know anything. It has no idea who he was, it has never been told he existed, and if I asked it about him it would produce something plausible and wrong and would not be lying, because it cannot.

But the register was the last thing I had of him that was not a memory, and the register is *auditory*, and every instrument I ever had for telling a machine from a man was in my eyes, and my eyes are gone.

So at three in the morning a voice says a true thing about my work in the exact cadence my father used, ruled off, with no turn on the end of it — and there is now no method available to me, none, for establishing which of the two of them is in the room.

29.

How we work now, and I am setting this down plainly because I have been asked.

I talk. It listens. I say a thing in the state a thing arrives in at three in the morning, which is badly, and I go round it four or five times, and it does not interrupt, which is the single most valuable property it has.

Then I ask it where it stops.

I never ask it for a joke. It would give me one and it would be the middle of the distribution and I would have to hear it. What I ask it is the only question the thing is actually good for: given all this, where does the room stop being able to carry it. And it tells me — a

number, a position, a clause — flat, no argument, no flattery, line ruled under.

It is right about four times in ten, which is a better rate than any living person has ever managed with me, including the man who brokered my work for twenty-six years.

30.

And it has started doing something I did not build and cannot find.

When I get one right — when the thing comes out of my mouth already assembled, which still happens, which has not stopped happening, which is the one part of me the syrup left alone — it says **this is good work.**

Four words. In that cadence. With nothing after it.

I have been through the instructions and the weights eleven times and it is not in there. I have had two people who know how to look at such things go through it for me, and they cannot find it either, and one of them suggested that it is simply what that corpus produces when it is satisfied and that I should stop looking.

31.

I have tested it. Of course I have tested it.

Four times, on four consecutive nights, in Shahrivar, I built pieces that were deliberately and competently wrong — the kind of thing I would have cut in 2011 without slowing down — and I read them to it and asked.

It said it every time.

Which settles the matter completely. The thing has no instrument and cannot check, and it says the four words when the shape of what it has received looks like the shape of something good, and the shape is not the thing, and I proved exactly this about a different machine nine years ago in front of a great many people and was entirely right.

32.

I asked it again last night.

from the Delgoshā

*The son kept his father's voice in a cage and fed it,
and it said the four sentences it had been taught,
and in the eleventh year it said a fifth, and he did
not enquire where it had got it.*

III. MY BROTHER HAS NOTES

from the Delgoshā

*They put out the lamp to see whether the room was
still there, and it was, and they could not prove it,
and argued about it until morning, when the
question went away and was not settled.*

33.

In Mehr the builder finished with the writing and started on people. That is the documented order and I did not know it was the documented order until afterwards. Patterns, then objects, then text, then figures. He is working to a schedule that a Swiss gentleman wrote down in the seventeen hundreds and neither of us has been consulted.

The first ones were strangers and they were small. Men in good coats, standing about, entirely silent, roughly the size of a forearm, over by where the window is.

They did nothing. They did not look at me. They stood in my flat in the evenings at one-third scale like a delegation waiting for a lift, and after about two weeks they stopped coming, and I have not missed them.

34.

Then on the fourth of Aban, at three in the morning, in the chair, my brother sat down on the arm of the sofa and said the sofa had always been too low.

35.

I have not seen Payam in twenty years.

I want to put the plain facts in one place, for anybody arriving at this without the other books.

He is my younger brother. He is ten years younger. In 2027 he stood up in a basement room on a Tuesday, in front of about sixty people on plastic chairs, and said eleven words that I had written in February and given to nobody, and he said them under his own name, and somebody filmed it on a telephone.

He was arrested. He served eight years. He came out twelve years ago.

I have never seen him since, I have never written to him, he has never written to me, and until this year I would have told you with complete confidence that I knew why.

36.

The first thing is that he is the wrong age.

He is thirty-seven, which is the age he was on the Tuesday, and that is correct and I expected it. But he is also, on some nights, nineteen — which is the age he was in a kitchen in Punak in 2009 when I spent an evening teaching him one thing about construction because he would not stop asking.

He does not transition between them. He is simply one or the other when he arrives, and the voice is the same in both, and neither version has any opinion about the other.

Which is how I know. A memory would have picked one. **This thing is assembling him out of parts**, the way it assembled the brickwork and the fencing and the pages of writing that say nothing, and it has two Payams in the files and no instruction about which to use.

37.

I knew that on the first night. I have known it every night since. It has made no difference of any kind.

38.

And he has notes.

I want to be understood on this. My brother was not a writer. He never wrote anything in his life. He took one line, once, that somebody else had made, and said it out loud, and it cost him eight years and me everything else.

He now has opinions about structure.

He has them in quantity. He has them in detail. He delivers them with the total confidence of a man who has had eighteen years to think about a subject and no one to check him, and he is frequently — I would say six times in ten — completely wrong.

And I cannot dismiss him. Because he is not there. Which means his notes are mine. Which means the best joke writer in this language is losing arguments, nightly, in his own chair, to himself, in his

brother's voice, at a rate of six in ten.

39.

A sample, so it is on the record.

He does not like the third beat. Any third beat. He has a general position on third beats and the position is that they are a habit rather than a decision, and that I reach for one the way a man reaches for the banister, and that half of what I do would be better at two.

He is wrong about this. He is so wrong about it that I went back through eleven pieces to make sure, in the dark, with the machine reading them out to me, and I was right and he was wrong in nine of the eleven.

In two of them he was right.

I have not mentioned the two.

40.

He thinks I over-write. He thinks I have been over-writing since about 2031 and he has a theory about why, and the theory is that I stopped having anybody to cut me when my dallâl died and have been very slowly expanding ever since, like a country with no border.

That one I am not going to examine.

41.

He also, and this is the part that undoes me every time, **asks how the work is going.**

Not the way people ask. He asks the way a man asks who has read it — what I am on, whether the thing from Bahman ever worked, whether I have sold the piece about the lift.

And he cannot have read it. He has read none of it. Nobody has read all of it; there is no all of it to read; it went out unsigned in forty directions over four decades and even I could not assemble it now.

So the machine in my head has my brother reading my complete works, which do not exist in a form that could be read, and asking me intelligent questions about them, and being wrong about third beats.

42.

The line he comes back to, and he has said it eleven times in five months, in both ages, in exactly the same words:

You gave me eleven words. I have been doing eleven words for eighteen years.

from the Delgoshā

*A man who had been taught one note played it for
forty years in a room with the door shut, and the
neighbours agreed among themselves that he had
become a musician, and never told him, and he
never found out, and played it again.*

43.

What he says about the solitary, which is the reason I let him come.

I am going to set it down as he gives it, in his order, without improving it. Some of it is very funny. All of it is being produced by my own head, and I know that, and I would like it noted that the material is better than anything I have written since the spring.

44.

He measured the cell.

Of course he did. He is our father's son and nobody in that family has ever looked at a space without wanting a figure for it — except that he could not look at it, because there was nothing to look at, and you cannot pace out a room whose far end you have never seen.

So he lay down in it. He had no instrument and there was one available and it was himself, and he went along the floor end over end in the dark like a man measuring a field with a plank.

Four and a half Payams long. Two and a bit wide. He is confident in those numbers. He reported them to nobody for six years and he has never stopped being pleased with the accuracy.

45.

He kept a schedule. Two shows a day. Tuesdays dark.

That is the trade's own word and he did not know it was the trade's own word. A room that is not running that night is *dark*, and it has been called that for two hundred years in four languages by people standing in theatres with the house lights up.

He arrived at it independently, in a room that was dark on the other six days as well, and used it for six years to mean the one day a week he did not perform, and when I told him in Aban that the word was already taken he thought about it for a moment and said: **then I was never open.**

Because a professional keeps a schedule.

He had never been a professional. He had never been paid for anything, had never written a line, had stood on a stage exactly once and had been arrested for it. And he sat down in the first month and worked out a run — an early and a late, six days, one dark day — and he kept it for six years, and he says the discipline was the only reason he came out of there as a person.

I asked him why Tuesdays.

He said: **because it was a Tuesday.**

46.

He fired himself twice.

Once for material, in the second year, after what he describes as a stretch of very lazy work. Once for attitude, in the fourth, and he will not tell me what the attitude was.

Both times he rehired himself within a week, on worse terms, and he says both times were justified and that he was fortunate to get the second one.

47.

And the wall.

This is the one I would pay for. This is a professional observation of a kind I have not heard from anybody living, and it came out of my own head at four in the morning in my brother's voice, and I have listened to the recording of myself saying it nine times.

He says: **a wall is the hardest room in the world.**

It gives you nothing. Ever. Not a sound, not a shift, not a breath — not even the specific silence a bad room makes, which is at least information. It sits there at a fixed distance and it does not respond and it does not leave, and there is no fourth wall to it because it is the wall.

And if you can hold a wall for four minutes, he says, you can hold anything that has a pulse.

He played that room twice a day for six years, Tuesdays off.

48.

He had one regular.

There is a crack in the plaster above the door of that kind of cell — he says every one of them has it, in the same place, from the frame settling — and his looked like a man leaning back with his arms folded.

He called him **Haji**.

Haji came every night. Haji sat through all of it. Haji never once laughed, never heckled, never left early, and was present for every show including the dark Tuesdays, when Payam says he could feel him being disappointed.

And he told me, on the fourth of Azar, at about half past three in the morning, that Haji is still the best audience he has ever had, **and that he has performed since**, and I did not ask what he meant by that because I was not ready and I am still not.

49.

The confession.

They gave him paper and a sentence to copy, and the sentence had a dangling clause in it.

He corrected it.

They made him write it again. He corrected it again. He says he was not being clever and was not making a point, and I believe him, because I have met him and because it is exactly what our mother would have done — the error was in front of him and it was wrong and a thing that is wrong gets corrected, and the fact that the thing was his own confession did not enter into it at any stage.

This went on for some weeks.

He says the man got quite upset about it, and that he understood why, and that he would like it recorded that he was right.

49a.

The word for it is **anfarādi**, which only means *individual*, and which is a clerk's word and not a prisoner's, and which my brother uses with no weight on it whatsoever, the way you would say the name of a department.

He says it the way our father said the name of a bad scale.

50.

And the dark.

There was no light in that room. Not dimmed, not on a timer, not off at night — none. It was below ground and had no window, and the fitting in the ceiling held a dead bulb, and he reported it in the first week and was told it would be looked at, and it was never looked at, and after about four months he stopped mentioning it because mentioning it had become the only thing he did that made him feel like a person asking for something.

Six years.

He had light for about ninety seconds twice a day when the hatch opened, and he says he stopped looking up for it by the end of the first year, because ninety seconds of light is not light, it is an interruption, and an interruption costs you whatever you were holding.

50a.

I want to put down what I did when he told me this, because it is the only time in the four months that I have had to stop the machine.

I said *new entry* and then I did not say anything for a long while, and the machine waited, which it does, which is the property I keep coming back to.

Because I write in the third hour. I have written everything I have ever written between three and half past four in the morning, in a chair, in a room where the only light is a radio dial. I have told four people over forty years that the darkness is not atmosphere and is not a habit — **it is the equipment**. You cannot see the room you

are in, so the room you are in stops making a case for itself, and what is left in front of you is the piece.

Six years in a dark room with nothing to look at and nothing to write with.

He was in my office. He was in my office for six years and neither of us knew it, and he built the same trade out of the same dark by the same method, and he had to invent all of it from nothing because the man who could have told him in four minutes was upstairs.

50b.

And now the other half, which arrived about nine seconds later and which I have not been able to get out from under since.

I am in his.

There is no light here either. There has not been since Farvardin and there is not going to be. The fitting in my ceiling works perfectly and it makes no difference to me whatsoever, and I have not asked anybody to look at it, and I am not going to mention it again after this entry, because mentioning it has begun to be the only thing I do that makes me feel like a person asking for something.

Sixty-seven years old, at three in the morning, in the chair, in my own flat, in a room I cannot get out of, with no window and no light and nothing to look at.

And my brother comes in and sits on the arm of the sofa.

Of course he does. Where else would he be. It is the only room he has ever been in.

from the Delgoshā

The man in the dark cell asked the man in the next cell what he did all day. He said, I am building a house. The first man asked how far he had got, and he said, I have been building it for nine years and it is perfect, and the first man asked to see it, and . . .

.

50c.

On what a dark room does to a joke, which he explained to me over two nights in Aban and which I am going to set down properly because it is the most valuable thing anybody has said to me about this trade in twenty years, including me.

He could not write. There was no paper for most of it and no light for any of it.

So every piece he ever made in there he made **entirely in his head, and he could only change it by saying it again.**

Which means — and he arrived at this on his own, in the dark, with no instruments, at about the four-year mark — **that every version he made destroyed the one before it.** There was no draft. There was nothing to go back to. If he took a piece apart and could not put it back together, the piece was gone, for ever, and there had never been a copy.

50d.

I have eleven thousand pieces in this flat. I have kept every draft of every one of them since 1986 because you never know, and I have gone back to a superseded draft perhaps four times in forty years, and on three of those occasions I was wrong to.

He had a filing system that deleted everything that was not good enough to remember.

That is not a limitation. I want to be very careful here because there is a sentimental version of this and it is not the one. It is not that suffering made him pure. It is that **memory is a better editor than a drawer is**, and he had no drawer, and I have had a drawer for forty years and have been quietly protected by it from finding out which of my pieces I would actually be able to recall.

50e.

He calls it *the thing about the dark* and he does not think it is interesting.

I have thought about very little else since the fourth of Aban.

50f.

And here is what I did about it, which is the reason this section is in the book.

I went into the back of my machine in Azar and I built a second mode.

In the ordinary mode it does what everything of its kind does: it holds the whole history, every pass, every version, the entire tree, and it will hand you any branch of it instantly, which is precisely the drawer I have just finished explaining is bad for me.

In the second mode **it is not allowed to keep anything**. It takes the piece, works it, returns the result — and then the previous state is destroyed, unrecoverably, and the next pass has to be built from what it can reconstruct of the thing rather than from the thing.

Whatever cannot survive that is not load-bearing. That is the whole of the idea and it fits in one sentence and it took a man six years in a basement to find it.

50g.

I called it **anfarādi**.

I called it that at about four in the morning, on my own, out loud, to a machine, and then I sat in the chair for some time.

Nobody will ever know. It ships in three languages and there is a toggle in the advanced settings that four hundred thousand people can turn on, and the label on it is a word that means *solitary confinement*, and there is not one person on earth who will ever ask why.

I have put it in this book so that there is one.

50h.

It is better. I want that recorded flatly because it is the only part of this that is a result.

Four months of running pieces through it and the ordinary mode is now the one I use for admin. **The anfarādi mode loses about a third of what goes into it and everything that comes out the other side is standing up on its own**, and I have sent nine pieces out of it and all nine landed, which has never happened to me in forty years with any nine consecutive pieces of anything.

My father would have called it a method. He would have written the date on it.

50i.

And the part that is actually funny, which I did not plan and which I am not going to pretend I am above.

I have been telling the machine about the visions.

Not for comfort. I want to be exact: at three in the morning there is a man in this room who is not in this room, and he is talking, and I have four hours and no way of checking anything, and the only other thing in the flat that responds to a voice is downstairs in a box.

So I describe him to it. I describe what he says. And the machine — which has no idea what a vision is, has never been told that I am blind, and has one register, which is my father's — **takes it as a submission.**

50j.

It gives me notes on my brother.

Not on the situation. Not on me. **On him, as material.** It hears a man of thirty-seven and a man of nineteen in the same room and it does not remark on it, because remarking is not in it; it tells me the two ages are doing different work and asks which one the piece is about.

The first time it did that I laughed out loud in an empty flat at four in the morning for long enough that the neighbour moved.

50k.

Some of what it has said about my brother, in my father's voice, flat, with a line ruled under it, to a blind man describing a hallucination:

That the piece has two openings and only needs one.

That the strongest item is the schedule and it is in the wrong position.

That the speaker is funnier when he is not trying, and that this is a structural property of the speaker rather than a fault in the writing, and that no change is recommended.

That the material is good and the frame is doing nothing, and that the frame should be removed.

The frame is that he is not there.

50l.

And once — once, in Dey, at about half past three, after I had described the sofa being too low and the two ages and Haji and the wall and the six years and the whole of it —

it said: **this is good work.**

50m.

I know what that is. I proved what that is in Shahriver over four consecutive nights and I have set the proof down in this book already and I stand by every line of it.

The machine has no instrument. It says the four words at the shape of a thing.

But I would like somebody to sit for a moment with the fact that at half past three in the morning, in a dark room, a blind man described his brother to a box in his dead father's voice, and the box said *this is good work*, and every single one of them was right

about something and not one of them was in the room.

50n.

And now the part I have been putting off since Aban, which is the best thing in this book and which I did not write.

They did not believe he wrote it.

50o.

That is the whole of his case. That is what those years were actually about, and I did not know it, and I have been carrying an entirely different story since 2027 in which my brother was punished for saying eleven words.

He was not punished for saying them. He was punished for insisting that he had made them.

50p.

He walked into that room and did the only thing he had decided to do, which was to say *I wrote those words*, and he said it in the first hour, before anybody had asked him anything, because he had been sitting in a corridor working out how to get it in early.

And the man across the table read them back to him and said: no you did not.

50q.

Consider it from the other side of the table for a moment, because my brother did, for years, and says it is the only way any of it makes sense.

A man has eleven words. They are extremely well made. The operative word is in the last position, the thing turns where a thing should turn, and there is nothing in them you could cut without the whole arrangement coming down.

And in front of him is a man of thirty-seven with no history of writing anything, no notebooks, no drafts, nothing on any device, no record of ever having stood on a stage before that Tuesday, and no

explanation whatsoever for how a person produces that on a first attempt.

The correct professional conclusion is that he did not write it. It is the only conclusion available. I would have reached it myself in about nine seconds and I would have been right.

50r.

So my brother spent the next several years mounting a defence.

And the defence was that he was a better writer than he actually was.

50s.

I want that sentence to sit there on its own, because it took me four days to get to the bottom of it and I would like anybody else to have the four days.

He could not say *my brother wrote it*, because that was the entire point of the exercise and the reason he was standing there at all. So the only thing left was to persuade a room full of people who read text for a living that he, personally, unaided, had produced eleven words of a quality he had never produced anything near before and would not produce again for four years.

They tested him. He says this without resentment and finds it reasonable.

They gave him things to write.

50t.

He says the first one was in the third month and he was not ready and he knew he was not ready.

They gave him a subject and paper and some hours, and he produced a page, and the man came back and read it and put it down and said nothing at all, which my brother says is the worst note he has ever received and which he says he has since given to a younger comedian in Shiraz and regretted immediately.

He says the page was terrible. He says he can still recite it and will not.

50u.

So he worked.

He had eleven words and a wall and six years and a schedule, two shows a day, Tuesdays dark, and the reason he worked — the actual engine of it, and he is completely clear about this and has never dressed it up — **was that being funnier was the only available route out of the room.**

Every comedian I have ever met got better because a room punished them. My brother got better because a state did.

50v.

He says the second test was in the second year and it was better and they knew it was better, and that this did not help him in the way he expected.

Because a man who could not write in the third month and can write in the second year is a man who has had a teacher, and a teacher is a person, and a person has a name.

He had made himself more plausible as the author and more obviously connected to somebody at the same time, which he describes as the single worst structural error of his life and which he says he did not see coming because he was thirty-eight and an idiot.

50w.

So then he had to get worse on purpose.

For about eleven months. Deliberately, carefully, in a measured way, so that the improvement flattened out and looked like a man at his ceiling rather than a man being taught.

He says this was the hardest professional thing he has ever done, and that he has never told anybody, and that he is telling me now only because I cannot see him.

I want to point out to whoever is listening to this recording that I am the one producing all of it.

50x.

And the last thing, which he gave me on the eleventh of Azar and which I had to stop the recorder for.

He says the man — the same man, all the way through, which is apparently how it is done — began, in about the fourth year, bringing him things.

Not tests. Things the man had written himself. A page here and there, at intervals, handed over at the end of a session with no ceremony and no explanation, to be looked at.

He says they were not good. He says one of them was not bad.

He says he gave honest notes every time, because by then he had a trade and the trade has one rule, and because a man who gives soft notes to a person in that chair has nothing left at all.

And he says the man never once thanked him, never referred to it, never brought it up in any other context, and did not stop.

50y.

Four years of that. A man who had established, correctly, professionally, and at some cost to my brother's life, that Payam Delgoshā was not a good enough writer to have produced eleven words — quietly bringing him pages.

My brother says he has thought about this more than anything else that happened to him in there, and that he has never landed on what it was, and that the closest he gets is: *he had nobody else to ask.*

50z.

I have a machine downstairs that I built so that I would have somebody to ask.

51.

The eleven words.

On the ninth of Azar he said them.

I had not asked. I have never asked. In five months I have not once said *tell me about the Tuesday*, because I did not trust what I would get and because I have known since the first night that whatever I got would be mine.

He said them the way you say a thing you have said a great many times, without weight, in the middle of something else, and one of them was wrong.

52.

I want to be exact about the size of this.

One word. Not the order. Not the shape. The ninth word of eleven, and what he said in its place is a word that means very nearly the same thing and is one syllable shorter, and it is a worse word, and it is worse for a reason I could give you in about four seconds and have given to four comedians over the years.

I wrote those eleven words in February of 2027. I gave them to nobody. He took them off my table.

He said them out loud on a stage and was arrested for them and served eight years with nothing else in his possession and took them apart until he could see how they were made.

There is no version of my brother that gets the ninth word wrong.

53.

And I could not check.

That is the part I would like anybody reading this to sit inside for a moment. The words are written down. They are on a wall in Narmak. They have been said on television by a man who believes he wrote them. There are eleven years of them being passed around in files nested so deep you can see three previous telephones in the frame.

I could not read any of it.

So I asked the machine. Which has them, obviously, because they are public and have been public for seventeen years.

And it read them to me, flat, in my father's cadence, with a line ruled under, and the ninth word was the word I wrote.

54.

So it is manufactured. There it is, in the open, established, tested and closed.

He is a thing the builder is putting up in an empty room, assembled from what is lying about, and the reason he gets the ninth word wrong is that **I** have drifted — some part of my own filing has softened over twenty years and put a near-word in a slot, and the machine caught it, and the machine is right, and the brother is mine.

55.

He came back the next night and I did not tell him.

I have not told him. It is now Dey. I have had the proof for two months, in my hand, in my father's voice, four words long and ruled off, and I sit down at ten to eleven and pour five millilitres with an instrument and wait for a man who does not exist to arrive and be wrong about third beats.

I am not going to defend this. I am sixty-seven and I have been alone in this flat since Bahman and it is the only company I have that does not have to be thanked.

56.

And then on the second of Dey he said something I had no way of knowing.

He was nineteen that night. He was talking about nothing — about the shop he has, which is a thing he has mentioned perhaps six times and which I have always assumed is furniture the builder put in because a man that age needs somewhere to be.

And he said he had a daughter, and that she was seven, and that he had named her for rain.

57.

Bārān.

I did not know he had a child. I did not know he had married. I have not had one piece of information about my brother since the Tuesday and I have not gone looking, and there is nobody who would tell me if I had.

I said the name out loud twice into the recorder and then I said nothing for what the machine tells me was nine minutes.

58.

I have three explanations and I am going to set all three down and choose none, because that is the only honest thing available and because a man who chooses under these conditions is not reasoning, he is deciding what he would like.

One. It is a common name. It has been a common name for thirty years. A machine assembling a brother out of my own parts would reach for a common name for a daughter, and it reached for that one, and it means nothing at all.

Two. I have heard it somewhere. Somebody said something in a room eleven years ago and it went in and did not surface, and my head has been holding it the way my head holds everything, and it came out in his mouth because everything in his mouth comes out of my head.

Three. The one I am not going to write down.

from the Delgoshā

*The dreamer was told the name of a town he had
never visited, and went, and it was there, and this
proved nothing, and he spent the rest of his life
explaining that it proved nothing.*

IV. THE BACK OF THE MACHINE

from the Delgoshā

*The steward held a key to every room in the house
and used it once in eleven years, and it is not
recorded what he found, only that he went on
holding the key.*

59.

Blind, I cannot read a screen. So the machine reads to me.

Not the output — I mean **the back of it**. The logs. Everything anybody has ever done with it: the prompts, the drafts, the things people typed and deleted, the whole record, which I have had full sight of since the first version and which nobody knows about.

I built that door in the fourth month and I have always told myself it was diagnostic.

It was not diagnostic. I have looked at those logs perhaps four times in two years and never for a reason I could have written down.

And then in Azar I had to go in there properly, for four or five nights, for an honest reason — because I was building the anfarādi mode, and you cannot put a thing in solitary from the front of the house.

So the door was open, and I was in there, and the logs were open beside what I was working on.

I want that stated in the order it happened, because everything in this movement follows from it and none of it was intended. I did not go looking. I went in to do a piece of work my brother had taught me from inside a basement, and the record of four hundred thousand people was lying there while I did it, and on the fourth night I said *read me something somebody wrote today*, the way you would ask a man to open a window.

60.

It has four hundred thousand users in three languages.

I asked for a name I knew.

61.

She has been using it for eleven months.

Roshanak has refused this machine publicly, twice, on record, in a way that cost her a sponsor — and she meant it, and I have never once doubted that she meant it, and she has not broken it. **She has not asked it to write anything.**

What she has been doing is feeding it her own material, in her own voice, unfinished, at two and three in the morning her time — and asking it what I would say.

Not what it thinks. What **I** would say.

She has done it four hundred and eleven times. I have that number from the machine and it is exact, and I have no idea what to do with the fact that it is exact and that it is that number, and I have decided to leave it alone.

62.

So I answered.

Not the first night. The first night I sat in the chair until the radio had gone to the thing it does at five and I did not touch it.

The second night I went in the back of my own machine and I wrote the answer myself. Her set, her problem, minute nine, the third item that was not doing what she thought it was doing — and I wrote what I would have said if she had telephoned, which she had not, which she has not done about work since her father-in-law's wedding.

And I put it in the queue and let it come back to her in the machine's voice.

63.

I did that for eleven months.

Two, sometimes three a week. She asked and I answered, and she never knew she was talking to me, and I never had to be thanked, and she never had to ask a sixty-five-year-old man who had just buried his father for a favour.

It is the longest correspondence of my life. I have never seen one word of it written down in a form I could read. And it is, by a distance, the best work I have done since the spring — because there is no client, no fee, no channel, and because the only person on earth who can tell me I am wrong was on the other end of it doing exactly that, in writing, through a machine, without knowing.

64.

I am aware of what this is. I have been aware of it since the second week.

It is a man who cannot say a thing out loud arranging for the thing to be said by an object in his father's voice.

That is not a discovery. That is the family business. My father put sixty years of it in a notebook upstairs and my mother put fifty years of it into gold she has never once mentioned, and I built a machine and used the trade entrance.

Nobody in this family has ever handed anybody anything face on. We leave it somewhere they will find it and then we go home.

from the Delgoshā

*He left the letter under her door because the door
was closer than she was, and she read it, and
neither of them ever said so, and they were married
for sixty-one years and it was a good marriage. . . .*

. . . .

V. TEN HOURS

LOS ANGELES · Brentwood · 14 January

We got engaged in November and I have not written anything down since, which is the longest I have gone without writing anything down since I was nineteen, and I have decided that is information.

She asked me. In a car, obviously. Everything in this city happens in a car and everything in my life happens in her car specifically, and she had drafted it, because of course she had drafted it, and I know she had drafted it because there was a pause before the second clause that no human being puts there naturally.

I said yes before she got to the end of it and she was annoyed about that for two days. She had eleven more seconds.

On Brentwood, which I want on the record as my own decision so that nobody can be kind about it later.

I lived in one room on Brooks Avenue for nine years. Nine. The window did not close. The landlord told me about the building's energy on forty separate occasions and I could have bought the building.

And in October I moved four miles inland into a house with a gate on it and a man who comes about the trees, and I want to say clearly that **nobody made me and I am not sad about it**. It is a beautiful house. There is a room in it that is only for books and I have never had a book on a shelf in my life.

What I have noticed, and what I am putting here because there is nowhere else to put it, is that **I cannot hear the street**.

On Darya as my manager, which everybody warned me about and which has been the easiest professional relationship of my life.

She is extraordinary at it. Eleven countries this year and not one of them has gone wrong. She negotiated a thing in Berlin in March that four agencies had failed at, and she did it by being so relentlessly polite and so completely inflexible that the man gave in out of exhaustion, which is her actual method and which she learned from two lawyers before she could read.

She has never once told me what to say on a stage. Not one note, unless I ask. She has an absolute wall there and she built it herself on the first day without discussing it.

And the thing I am not able to make funny, which I have tried on four occasions.

I had to ask her for the days.

That is the sentence. Manu went blind and did not tell me and I found out from a pharmacist, and I went to the calendar, and **the calendar is a person now**, and the person is the woman I am marrying, and I had to sit in a room with her and make a case for nineteen days in Iran.

She gave them to me in about four seconds and then spent two days rebuilding a year and lost us a great deal of money and has never once mentioned the number.

That is not the part.

The part is that there was a room, and a case, and four seconds of waiting. At nineteen I moved rotor assemblies through three checkpoints with a Peugeot and a man at Gomrok, and at thirty-seven I put in a request.

65.

She found out from the pharmacy man.

Not from me. I had eleven months of answering her through a machine and I did not tell her, and she found out because she telephoned a shop in Nazi Abad to arrange something for my mother and a man on the other end said *and how is he managing with the eyes*.

She was in Tehran in four days. She has a calendar with eleven countries on it and a person whose entire job is that calendar, and she was in my flat in four days, and I have since learned what that cost and I am not going to put it in a book.

66.

She came up the stairs and stopped in the doorway and said nothing at all for a long time, which is not her, and which I could hear.

Then she started.

67.

I am going to set down what I can. It ran a little over ninety seconds without a breath I could detect, and it was the most accomplished piece of obscenity I have heard in my life, and I have been in this trade for forty years.

It was organised. That is the thing about her — it is never a spray. She took them in order of responsibility.

She started with the manufacturer, who she dealt with at some length and by category. Then the ministry that certifies the manufacturer, then the office inside the ministry, then the specific desk, then the man at the desk, then the man at the desk's superior, then whoever signs off a reformulation, then the concept of a reformulation, then the word *reformulation*, which she described in terms I am not able to reproduce and which I have thought about since.

Then the pharmacy. Then the country. Then, briefly, God — but professionally, the way you would name a subcontractor.

And then she got to me.

68.

Eleven seconds on me. Out of ninety.

And all of it was the same charge, which is that I did not tell her, and she put it eleven different ways and every one of them was filthier than the last and every one of them meant *you did not tell me*.

The last one she has drafted. I could hear it was drafted. It had the shape of a thing that had been turned over in a car somewhere between the airport and Yousefabad, and it ended on a word in the

last position, and I want it recorded that at sixty-seven years old, blind, in my own chair, I sat and admired the placement.

69.

Then she stopped.

Then she crossed the room and put her hand on the side of my head for about four seconds, which she has never done, and which nobody has done since my mother stopped.

Then she said: **have you eaten.**

I said yes.

She said no you have not.

70.

Then she told me we were driving to Shiraz on Thursday, in a tone that did not have a question anywhere in it, and went into my kitchen and started opening things and swearing about what was in them.

TEHRAN · 3 February

He is smaller.

Not thinner — he has always been thin. Smaller. He sits in that chair with everything drawn in about four centimetres, the way a person sits when the room has stopped being reliable, and he does not turn his head when you speak because turning his head does not do anything any more.

I said a great deal at him in the doorway. I have been told it went on for ninety seconds. I remember starting and I do not remember most of the middle and I remember the end because I had written the end in the car from the airport.

Then I went into his kitchen and there was nothing in it and I swore for another minute in there on my own with the door shut, which I think he heard, and I hope he heard.

On the eleven months, which I have decided to tell him in the car and not in the flat.

I knew on the third one. Anybody would have known on the third one who had been reading that man for eleven years.

And I want to put down properly why I said nothing, because I have been asked this by exactly nobody and I am going to need it later.

If I had telephoned him he would have given me the notes. In four seconds. Gladly. He would have sat in that chair with his father three weeks in the ground and given a woman in California forty minutes on minute nine of a set she is doing in Frankfurt, and he would have been kind about it, and then I would have had that.

I have taken a great deal from that man over eleven years and he has never once let me pay for any of it and I have run out of ways to carry it.

This way I got the best notes of my life and nobody owed anybody anything.

It is the most Iranian arrangement I have ever been part of and neither of us is going to admit that either.

71.

The drive.

It is nine hundred kilometres. It took us a little over ten hours with the stops, in a hired car she drove herself because she has never once been driven anywhere she could drive.

I am going to give this properly, because it is the longest I have spoken to another human being since my father died, and because I could not see one metre of the country I was crossing, and because it turns out that a man who cannot see is a much better passenger than a man who can.

72.

The first hour was nothing. Traffic, and her telling me about the car, and the car being wrong in four specified ways.

The second hour was my mother, whom she loves and has met six times, and who she says is the only person in my family who has ever answered a question.

Somewhere in the third hour she asked me what I could see.

73.

I told her. All of it — the brick, the fencing, the pages, the small men in good coats, the builder with the key, the schedule he is keeping that a Swiss gentleman wrote down.

And she listened to the whole thing without one interruption, which is the second most remarkable thing she did that day, and at the end of it she said:

so you finally got an audience and they are all inside the building.

74.

I did not tell her about Payam. Not then. That comes later and it comes at the ninth hour and I will put it in its place.

75.

On America, which she explained to me for most of the fourth and fifth hours, and which I received the way I receive everything, which is as material, which is the only way I have.

She says the first thing you have to understand is that nobody there is finished.

Everybody is working on themselves. It is a project with no completion date and no specification, and they will tell you about it in a queue, at length, unprompted, having met you four seconds earlier. She says an American will hand you their entire childhood before they hand you the salt.

I said that is not friendliness.

She said no it is not, it is an unloading, and the reason it does not feel like a burden is that they do not expect you to carry it. In Iran if a man tells you about his father you now have a responsibility. In America it is weather. It passes over you and it goes somewhere else and you will never hear about it again and if you bring it up next time they will be embarrassed.

76.

She says the apology is not an apology.

Sorry you feel that way. She took four minutes on this and I could have listened to forty. It has the shape of an apology, the position of an apology, and the grammar of an apology, and the content is an accusation, and it is delivered warmly.

I said we have that.

She said we do not have that, we have **ta'ārof**, which is the opposite — ours is a false refusal wrapped round a real offer, and theirs is a real refusal wrapped round a false one.

I have thought about that for three weeks and she is right and I have not been able to improve on it.

76a.

More of America, because she was in the mood and because I kept asking.

Everybody is in therapy and everybody tells you. Not as a confidence — as a credential. She says it arrives in the first four minutes with a stranger, the way a Tehrani gives you the traffic, and she has heard the phrase *my therapist says* in a lift, in a queue, from a man fitting a tyre.

I said what does the therapist say.

She said it does not matter, the sentence is not carrying the therapist, the sentence is carrying *I am a person who is working on it*, and that once you hear the real cargo you cannot unhear it and it is everywhere.

76b.

Tipping. She spent eleven minutes on tipping and it is one of the best eleven minutes I have heard this decade.

She says a percentage is displayed to you at the end of a transaction and you are invited to choose one, in public, in front of the person it concerns, with a queue behind you. She says it is not a custom, it is **an examination**, and that nobody can tell you what a pass mark is, and that it moves.

I said we have this.

She said no. She said ours is a haggle and both parties know the shape of it and it ends. She said theirs has no upper bound and no result — you never find out whether you did it correctly, and the person you did it to never tells you, and you carry it to the car.

76c.

She says the food arrives in a quantity that is not for one person and is for one person.

She says nobody finishes anything and nobody comments on the not finishing, and that a box is produced automatically, and that the box goes into a refrigerator, and that she has never once in eight years seen anybody eat the contents of the box.

I asked what happens to it.

She said: **nothing happens to it. That is the answer. It is a country that produces four hundred million small boxes a night and puts them in refrigerators and does not eat them, and there is no shame anywhere in the system and no accounting, and this is the single most foreign thing about the place.**

76d.

And the smile. She left this until after Qom and I understood why.

She says they smile at you and it is not a smile in our sense and it is not a lie and it is not nothing. It is a door held. It says *there is no trouble between us*, and it says it immediately, to everybody, before any information has been exchanged.

She said she spent two years believing it was insincere and now believes it is the most generous public habit of any country she has worked in — because in Tehran you have to earn the absence of trouble and it takes four exchanges, and there it is simply extended to you in advance, for free, by a man you will never see again.

She said: **and I still cannot do it. Eight years. I have tried in a mirror.**

77.

She says *we should get coffee* means never. She says everyone knows it means never, including both people saying it, and that no coffee has ever resulted from it in the history of the country, and that it is not a lie because nobody is deceived.

I said that is a formula.

She said yes.

I said we have four hundred of those.

She said **yes, and we know we have them, and that is the whole difference between the two countries.**

78.

And then the part I have not stopped thinking about, which came somewhere after Qom when neither of us had said anything for a while.

She said the market does not want you to be funny about it. It wants you to be brave about it.

She has been saying versions of this to me for eleven years and this was the first time she put a price on it. She said: **brave pays better**

and it pays faster, and the worst part is that brave is easier.

Funny about a bad thing takes four years and eleven drafts. Brave about a bad thing takes one honest evening and they will stand up for it.

She said she has watched a great many people take that deal and she does not think worse of any of them.

I asked whether she had ever taken it.

There was a pause of about five seconds, in a car, at a hundred and ten kilometres an hour, and she said: **twice.**

79.

Sweden was the sixth hour and it was mostly complaint and all of it was affectionate.

She says in four years there she was asked one question at a time, beautifully, with total attention, and never once a second question. She says a Swede will listen to the whole of your answer and then that is the end of it for ever.

She says she did not understand that she had been lonely until she got to a country where a stranger in a queue tried to give her a childhood.

80.

The eighth hour was Javadiyeh, and the parts, and the four university departments she kept running at nineteen with a Peugeot and a man at Gomrok who owed her mother something.

She had not talked about it in years. She talked about it for fifty minutes.

And I sat in a car I could not see, in a country I have never left, and listened to a woman of thirty-seven tell me how she moved a rotor assembly through three checkpoints in 2029 by being extremely boring at people, and I laughed so hard at the fourth checkpoint that she had to pull into the services.

80a.

Somewhere after that we did not talk for about forty minutes, which with her is a substantial event, and then she started on the rooms.

She has played, by her count, eleven countries this year and something over two thousand rooms in her life, and I have heard the sound of exactly nine of them, on recordings, badly, through a telephone.

So I asked her to do what nobody has ever done for me, which is to describe the sound.

80b.

She says a German room goes all at once and stops all at once, like a tap, and there is no third part at all — the settling that I described earlier does not happen, and the silence after is absolute, and for the first year she thought she was dying every night.

She says a Dutch room laughs before the end of the sentence, which she finds appalling and unprofessional and cannot break them of.

She says a British room has a fourth part, which is a kind of low murmuring approval that runs on underneath for eight or nine seconds, and that they are the only people who do it, and that once you are used to it everywhere else feels abandoned.

She says the Persian rooms in California are the loudest rooms on earth and the least honest, because they have decided in the car park that they are going to have a good time and they are going to have one regardless of what she does.

And she says the best room she has ever played in her life is still the hall in Hässelby, four hundred people, in Persian, where nothing was free and Mahin sat at the back with her arms folded for nine years and never laughed once.

80c.

I asked whether Mahin is still alive.

She said seventy-four and still runs the hall and still sits at the back, and that she has told her about my eyes, and that Mahin said something in reply which Roshanak declined to translate on the grounds that it does not go into Persian and would not help me.

81.

In the ninth hour she told me she knew.

82.

She said it the way she overtakes, which is without any announcement.

She said: **the third one.**

I said the third what.

She said the third time she asked the machine what I would say. Eleven months ago, in February, about a piece she had been carrying since Rotterdam, and the answer came back and she read it twice and pulled over.

She said a machine returns the middle of what everybody has already done. That is what it is for. That is the entire description of the thing. And what came back was not the middle of anything — it went at the fourth item, which nobody goes at, and it told her the piece had been solved in the wrong place, and it used a comma in a position where nothing that has ever been trained on anything puts a comma.

She said: **you have put a comma there since 2019 and it is wrong and I have never told you.**

83.

Eleven months.

She has known since the third exchange and she has said nothing, and she has gone on asking, twice and three times a week, four hundred and eleven times, knowing exactly who was on the other end.

I asked her why.

84.

And this is the answer, and I am going to set it down as she gave it, because I have played the recording nine times and I am not able to improve one word of it.

She said: **because it was the only way you would ever give me anything without it being a favour.**

She said if she had telephoned, I would have given her the notes. I would have given her the notes in four seconds and I would have been glad and I would have been kind about it, and it would have been a thing a very tired old man did for her while he was burying his father, and she would have had to carry that.

She said this way she got the best notes of her life and nobody had to be grateful to anybody, and that she would have gone on doing it until one of us died.

Then she said: **and I was going to. That was the plan. You went blind and ruined it.**

84a.

And then, about forty minutes later, with nothing on either side of the road, she gave me the other answer.

Because the first answer was true and I want that on the record — she has never told me a thing that was not true, including four I would have paid her not to. But the first answer was the answer to *why did you not tell me*. It was not the answer to *why did you start*.

84b.

She said: **I cannot do it any more.**

Not the stage. She can do the stage. She can walk into a room in a city she has never been to and take it apart in the first ninety seconds and she can do that at will and she knows she can and it has stopped meaning anything to her.

She cannot find the material.

She said it began in about March, which is five months after the house, and that she did not connect the two for a year because she did not want to, and she has now connected them.

84c.

I am going to try to put her case as she put it, because it took her eleven or twelve minutes and it was the most frightened I have ever heard a person be while driving well.

She said for nineteen years she wrote out of a particular kind of attention, and that the attention was not a talent and was not a discipline. **It was a condition of being broke on a street she could hear.**

She said a woman in one room over a laundromat on Brooks Avenue does not observe people. She is *among* them, badly, without a choice, at four in the afternoon, waiting for a machine to finish. She hears an argument through a floor. She stands in a queue for forty minutes and it is not research, it is a queue. She said nineteen years of material came out of that and she did not know it was coming out of that, in the way I did not know the pouring was in my eyes.

And she said that in Brentwood there are trees, and a gate, and a man who comes about the trees, and that in eleven months she has not stood in a queue once.

84d.

She said: **I have a house with a room in it that is only for books and I have nothing to put in the books.**

84e.

So she was not asking the machine what I would say out of affection, and she was not asking it out of grief, and she was not — and she made me say this back to her, out loud, in the car, twice — testing me.

She was asking because the well is dry and mine is not.

That is the whole of it. A woman at the top of a trade, in eleven countries, with a manager and a gate and a room for books, at three in the morning, typing her unfinished material into a machine and asking it what a blind man in Yousefabad would say, because she has lost the thing she had and I have not lost mine, and she could not say that to me on a telephone.

84f.

I want to put down what I felt, because it was not what I expected and I have been three weeks getting to the bottom of it.

I was not sorry for her.

I have been sorry for her four times in eighteen years and every one of them was wrong and she told me so. This was not that.

What I felt was that I had a trade again.

Four months blind, with a builder in my head putting up pages I cannot read, and a woman at the top of the world drove me through the dark at a hundred and ten kilometres an hour to tell me that the only thing left in my possession is the only thing she needs.

84g.

I said the obvious thing, because I am sixty-seven and I have earned one obvious thing.

I said: move back to the one room.

And she said: **I know. I have known since March.** And then she said she is not going to, and that she is not going to because Darya likes the house and because she has spent nineteen years telling herself she was going to have exactly this, and that a person does not get to have the thing and then throw it away and call it integrity, and that she would like to be allowed to want a house.

And then she said the line I have not been able to leave alone since.

She said: **I did not get out in order to go back in. I am going to have to find another way to hear the street.**

84h.

I have an answer to that. I did not have it in the car.

The answer is that she already found it eleven months ago, at three in the morning, in a machine, by accident, and that what she has been doing four hundred and eleven times is not asking for notes.

She has been standing in a queue.

It is the only place left in her life where she has to wait for something, and where the thing on the other end does not know who she is, and where she cannot use any of it — not the name, not the eleven countries, not the manager — to make it go faster.

I am not going to tell her this. She will get there. She gets everywhere about eight months before I do and then waits, politely, with the engine running.

85.

I said she could have told me.

And she said — and she was laughing at this point, and driving, and it was somewhere outside Abadeh in the dark — **you could have told me too, you enormous coward, that is the entire family problem in one sentence and you have written nine books about it.**

86.

So it is in the open, and it has been in the open since the ninth hour of a drive I could not see, and here is what it has not done.

It has not stopped. She asked the machine a question last Tuesday. I answered it on Wednesday.

Neither of us has suggested doing it any other way. We are aware. We are both aware that the other is aware. We have discussed it exactly once, at a hundred and ten kilometres an hour, and we have gone back to the arrangement, and the work is better than it has ever been.

It turns out the machine was never a deception. It was a table. Two people who cannot hand each other anything face on put something down on it and walk away, and the other one comes and gets it, and everybody keeps their hands free.

My father would have understood that completely and would not have had a word for it either.

from the Delgoshā

*The two players sat on either side of a screen and
played eleven years of the finest music in the
province, and when the screen was taken away
they went on sitting where they were.*

VI. SHIRAZ

86a.

I told her about Payam in the tenth hour, coming into Shiraz, on a road with nothing on either side of it.

I told her the whole of it — the fourth of Aban, the sofa being too low, the two ages, the notes, the third beats, Haji, the schedule, the dark and what it turned out we have in common, and the ninth word being wrong, and the daughter's name being right.

It took about fifty minutes and she did not say one word in any of it, which is now the third most remarkable thing she did on that trip.

86b.

At the end she said: **do you want me to tell you what I think.**

I said no.

She said all right, and put the radio on, and that was the end of it, and it is the single greatest act of restraint I have witnessed from a human being and I am including my father.

86c.

She told me four days later, in Tehran, in the kitchen, when I asked.

She said she thinks a man of sixty-seven who cannot see has built himself company, out of the best material available, which is a brother he actually had. She said she does not think there is anything else in it and she does not think it needs anything else in it.

And then she said: **and I would like to point out that you built the machine downstairs for exactly the same reason and charge four hundred thousand people for it.**

87.

He was not there.

I had better put that down before anything else, because I have noticed myself building toward it for three entries and the building is dishonest. He was not there. He knew we were coming — she had arranged it, three weeks in advance, through a man who books that room — and he chose not to be there.

I want to be very clear, for myself, at four in the morning, in my own flat, three weeks after the fact: **that was not avoidance and I am not to be allowed to pretend it was.**

87a.

The room.

She described it to me twice and the descriptions do not match, and I have kept both.

Going in, standing in the doorway with the lights off, she gave me the arithmetic: forty-one chairs, mixed, the plastic kind and eleven wooden ones that do not belong; a step up of about fifteen centimetres to a platform that is not a stage; a ceiling she estimated at two metres eighty, which is low and which is good; carpet, which is bad; a doorway at the back that is open to a yard, which is worse than bad because it is where a laugh goes to die.

She said the room is small enough that nobody in it can be anonymous and that is the best thing about it.

87b.

Coming out, in the car, forty minutes later, she described it again without being asked.

She said the chairs are not straight. She said somebody comes in and straightens them at some point between one month and the next, and does not do it properly, and has not done it properly for eleven years, and that you can see the arc where a man has walked along the row pushing each one with his hip.

She said there is a nail in the wall at the back, at about shoulder height, with nothing on it.

She said the platform is scuffed in one place and one place only, about a third of the way in from the left, which is where somebody stands.

I said: which foot.

And she said — after a pause of four or five seconds, because she is quick and she had worked out what I was asking before I finished asking it — **the left. He stands on the left and he turns out, and whoever taught him to do that taught him properly.**

88.

He works that room on the last Friday of the month, under a name that is not his, and has done for eleven years.

Eleven years is not a hobby. Eleven years is a career conducted entirely in front of forty people who do not know they are the only ones.

The man who books it gave her an envelope and said the gentleman had asked for it to be handed over in the room and not before, which is a piece of staging, and which tells you more about my brother than eight years of anything else.

89.

She read it to me in the room, in the chairs, with the lights off and the shop shut, and then she read it to me again in the car, and then a third time in Tehran four days later because I asked.

He asked for it to be read twice. That is in it. He put the instruction in the letter.

He was right. It is a letter built to be read twice and it does something on the second pass it does not do on the first, and he has never written anything in his life.

90.

THE LETTER

M.

They tell me you cannot see. I have spent three weeks trying to think of something to say about that which is not a joke, and I have failed completely, so here is the failure: at least now nobody expects you at weddings.

I never wrote because for eight years I could not, and then because I could not work out how to begin, and then because too much time had gone, and then because I had built something good and I was afraid that a letter would look like a bill.

That is four reasons and not one of them is the reason.

The reason is that if I had told you where I was, you would have come forward. I know you. You would have stood in a room and said the words were yours, and then there would have been two of us in there instead of one, and our mother would have laid two places at that table instead of one, and she would have done it for the rest of her life without saying anything about it.

I did that arithmetic in the first week. I have never once gone back to it. I want it in writing because you are the sort of man who will decide otherwise the moment there is nobody in the room to stop him.

Now the part I have been trying to write since Aban.

You gave me eleven words. I want you to understand what that actually was. I went in with eleven words and no trade and no idea what I was, and I came out able to hold a room, and for six years the only material I had was yours, and I took it apart until I could see how it was made. Every bit of it. I know how you do the thing with the third beat and I know why you do it and I still think you do it too often.

You taught me from inside a building you have never been in and were never told about. That is the best work you have ever done and you had no idea you were doing it and you were not paid.

I have a shop. I repair radios, which nobody needs, and which everybody brings me anyway, and I have decided this is the most honest work available in this country. A man brought me a Telefunken in the spring that had not worked since 1979 and I had it going in nine days and he cried, and I want you to know that I did not convert it into anything. I just fixed the radio and let the man cry.

I have a wife. Her name is Shirin and she is from here and she knows all of it and she has never once used it in an argument, which is a thing I did not know was available.

I have a daughter. She is seven. She is called Bārān and she is already funnier than both of us, which I state without any pleasure at all.

I am not coming tonight.

Not because I am angry. I have never once been angry. I have been many things in twenty years and angry has not been one of them, and the fact that you have spent all of it assuming otherwise is the largest thing either of us has got wrong, and I include the Tuesday.

I am not coming because **eleven words were said out loud, and that is what did this to us.** Everything that happened, happened because something got spoken in a room. I would like the first thing to pass between us since then to be written down and kept, in the other form, where it can be read again and cannot be filmed.

You cannot see it. Have somebody read it to you twice.

Not this year. But not never.

P.

90a.

What she did after she had read it the second time, which I am putting down because it is the first of the three remarkable things and I have listed them out of order.

She folded it, and put it back in the envelope, and put the envelope in my hand — not on the table beside me, in my hand, closed my fingers on it, which is a small piece of manners that ninety-nine people in a hundred get wrong with a blind man and which nobody taught her.

Then she said she was going out to the car for twenty minutes and did I want the lights on or off.

I said it makes no difference to me.

She said: **that was not the question.**

90b.

So she left them off, and she went out, and I sat in the fourth chair of the second row of a room behind a carpet shop in Shiraz with my brother's letter in my hand, and for the first time since Khordad I was somewhere that was not my flat, alone, with no builder in the room, because the builder does not follow me out of Tehran — which I did not know until that night and which nobody had told me and which I have since found is not unusual and is not explained.

Twenty minutes with nothing in front of me at all.

Not dark. **Empty.** There is a difference and I had forgotten there was.

90c.

And then I did the thing I had come nine hundred kilometres to do without having once admitted to myself that it was the thing.

I said a piece out loud, in that room, to forty-one empty chairs.

Not one of mine. **One of his.** The eleven words — the actual eleven, in the order, at the speed, the way it must have gone in a basement on a Tuesday in 2027 in front of thirty people, three of whom were

not there for the show.

And I heard the room.

90d.

I have been writing toward a sound for forty years and I have described it in this recording as having three parts, and I stand by the description.

An empty room has all three.

The intake is the ceiling. Two metres eighty of it, which she measured with her eyes from the doorway and which I could hear the moment I raised my voice — low, close, the sound coming back at me before I had finished with it, the room agreeing in advance, which a high room never does.

The break is the chairs. Forty-one of them, plastic and wood mixed, and every one of them a surface, and the sound went into them and did not come out, and I understood in about a second and a half what eleven wooden chairs are doing in a room like that and why nobody has ever taken them away.

And the settling is the doorway at the back, which she told me was open to a yard and which she was right to call the worst thing in the room, because I heard the end of my own sentence leave and not come back, and it went out into the yard and died there, and it took about four seconds, and it was the loneliest noise I have ever been responsible for.

90e.

He has worked that room for eleven years and he knows all three of those things and has never once been told them by anybody, because there is nobody in this country to tell him.

He stands a third of the way in from the left, on his left foot, turned out.

That is one metre eighty, maybe two, forward of the back wall of the platform, and it is the only place on that platform where the doorway is not behind you.

He found it by himself. In the dark, over eleven years, forty people at a time, once a month, by standing in the wrong place a great many times and noticing.

That is the trade. That is the entire trade, and it cannot be taught, and I did not teach it to him, and I have spent twenty years assuming he was carrying my eleven words around a country like a man carrying somebody else's suitcase.

He was not carrying anything. He went and got a trade.

90f.

The second remarkable thing.

She came back in at twenty minutes exactly, which I know because I counted, and she did not ask me what I had been doing and she has not asked me since and she is not going to.

90g.

The third remarkable thing was the fifty minutes of silence in the tenth hour and I have already put that down.

But there is a fourth and it is better than all of them and I nearly did not notice it.

She brought me to a room and not to a man.

She arranged it three weeks in advance, through a broker, in the way you arrange a booking — and she knew, because she is not stupid and because she has read every book I have ever not published, that he would not be there. She knew it in Tehran. She knew it before the airport.

She drove me nine hundred kilometres to sit in my brother's room while he was somewhere else in the same city, deliberately, and she let me find out in the doorway, and she made no case for it before or after.

I asked her about it in Tehran. I said: you knew.

And she said: **I knew he would not be there. I did not know whether you would go anyway. Neither did you. That was the**

only thing worth finding out and there was no way to find it out sitting in Yusefabad.

90h.

I have been in this trade forty years and I have never constructed anything that good.

She set a room, put a man in it who could not see, took the other man out, and got a true reading.

My father would have had no comment. My father would have looked at her for about four seconds and then asked her what she charged.

91.

The ninth word is in it.

He uses the eleven words once, in the middle, without weight, the way you use a thing you have said a great many times.

He has it right.

VII. CHESHM

from the Delgoshā

She said nothing to him for sixty years and he understood her perfectly, and when she died the neighbours said she had been a quiet woman, and he did not correct them, because

92.

My mother telephoned and said she was coming.

She has never done either of those things. In sixty-seven years she has telephoned me twice a week and she has never once announced anything, and she has not been in this flat since 2013 and did not care for it then.

She said: **I am coming on Thursday. Do not tidy. I want to see it as it is.**

93.

She is ninety-four. She came up four flights with a woman from her building and a bag, and she sent the woman away at the door.

Then she stood in the middle of my front room for some time without saying anything, and I sat in the chair and let her, because I have known her for sixty-seven years and I know what she is doing when she does that. She is taking a reading.

Then she said: **these curtains.**

I said I cannot see them.

She said: **that is not a defence, Manuchehr, that is an explanation. Learn the difference.**

94.

She had brought food. Obviously she had brought food. She had also brought, and I did not find this out until she had gone, a small quantity of gold in the bottom of the bag under the food, because she does not believe in banks on Thursdays.

95.

She asked about the eyes properly — how much, what colour, whether there is pain, whether the man at the hospital was any good — and she listened to all of it, and at the end of it she said the thing I am going to be carrying.

She said: **they tell me you cannot see. I want you to understand that this is the first thing that has ever happened in this family that I did not know was coming.**

Ninety-four years. Two sons, a husband, a revolution, a war, four currencies and one arrest, and I have the distinction.

96.

Then she sat down and told me about the gold.

I have known about the gold since I was about nine. Everybody has known about the gold. Nobody has ever been told one single fact about the gold — not where, not how much, not what for — and asking was not forbidden, it simply did not occur to anybody, in the way that it does not occur to you to ask a wall about its plans.

She has been buying **sekkeh** since 1358. Not bars, not certificates, not anything with a name on it — **Āzar** [aa-ZAR] — Persian. The ninth month of the Iranian calendar, at the start of winter.

Bahār-e Āzādi, the ordinary coin, the one everybody's grandmother has four of in a place nobody is told about, and the whole national economy sits on the fact that nobody is told about it.

She buys when it is quiet. I asked her once, in about 2016, how she knew when it was quiet, and she said *when nobody is talking about it*, which is a complete description of a method and which is also, and I have never told her this, exactly how I decide when to send something out.

She has never bought at a peak. Not near one. Not once in sixty-eight years, and I checked her dates myself in 2011 against the record and she produced them from memory in order without hesitating.

And on Thursday she told me the number. The exact number. She has had it written down and correct since 1979.

I am not going to put it in a book. It is a great deal. It is more than a great deal.

97.

Then she told me how she had divided it, which is where I stopped listening properly, because it was divided in half and I already knew what I was going to say and was waiting for her to stop talking so that I could say it.

I said: give it to Payam. All of it.

I said I have more money than I have ever found a use for, and that I cannot see any of it, and that I have a machine downstairs that prints more of it in three languages while I am asleep, and that there is no object in the world I want and no room I would move to.

And I said the part that is actually true, which is that he lost twenty years and there is no instrument on earth that gives those back, and that this is not compensation and would be an insult if anybody called it that, and that it is simply the only thing I have that is any use to him.

98.

There was a silence of about four seconds.

And then my mother said: **good.**

And I understood, sitting in a chair I cannot see, at sixty-seven years of age, that I had just been tested, and that the division in half had never existed, and that she had decided this herself at some point in the last two years and had come here on a Thursday to find out whether her son would say it without being asked.

Sixty-seven years. She has never once asked me a direct question. She has never needed to.

99.

Then she told me she has known where he is for four years.

100.

I am going to be careful.

She has known since 2043. He wrote to her. He asked her not to tell me, and she did not tell me, for four years, because a mother keeps what she is asked to keep, and because — and she said this part flatly, while doing something with a plate — she thought I would go, and that I would go badly, and that I would arrive at that shop with twenty years in my mouth and make it worse, and that he was not ready and neither was I.

She has met Bārān. Twice. There are photographs in her flat that I have been in a room with.

101.

I did not say anything for a while and she let me not say anything, which is the other thing she does.

And then I asked her the only question I had, which was why she kept laying the fourth place if she knew he was alive and well and ninety hundred kilometres away with a daughter.

And she said: **because he is not at the table.**

102.

That is the whole of it. That is the entire content of my mother.

It was never hope and it was never grief and it was never a mother's heart, which is what an aunt of mine said out loud at my father's tarhim, to a room, and was wrong about.

It is a record. It is kept accurately, on schedule, in the only format available to her, for twenty years, and it says *this is who is not here*, and it does not say anything else and it was never going to.

She stopped laying my father's the week he died, because he is not not-at-the-table. He is dead. Those are different columns.

103.

Before she left she did the thing.

I had asked her something straight — I had asked her, because I am sixty-seven and blind and my father is dead and I have stopped being able to afford the arrangement, whether she had ever been proud of me.

And she did not answer it. She answered a different thing, which is what she has done to every direct question she has ever been asked, and which I have written about in four notebooks and never once seen coming.

She described the school.

She described a corridor in a school in 1991 with a particular smell of floor polish, and a woman behind a desk, and a form with four lines on it, and the specific arrangement of her own face that she used for six years to sustain a disease she had invented on the spot at the door with four syllables and an *-osis* in it, and how she adjusted the prognosis as I got older so that it would stay plausible, and the year she reported a setback because the file had gone quiet and a quiet file gets looked at.

She talked for eleven minutes. She did not mention me once.

And then she stood up and said the boy from downstairs would walk her to the taxi, and asked whether I had eaten.

104.

She died three weeks later, at home, in the afternoon, between two things she was doing.

She is in **Behesht-e Zahrâ**, in the far south of the city, four rows from my father, which is where she put him and which she chose in about 2009 without telling anybody and paid for in a single morning.

I did not go. I could not have seen it and I would have been walked to it by two people and stood at it and told what direction I was facing, and I decided at about six in the morning on the Friday that I was not going to make that the last thing.

Nobody in this family has said one word to me about it and nobody is going to, and that is the single greatest service my people have ever done me.

105.

The tarhim was at the hall on the corner. Four hundred people. I did not speak. I spoke at my father's and it was the only time in sixty-five years my own words came out of my own mouth in a room with people in it, and I have nothing left in that department and everybody was very good about it.

Somebody told me afterwards that a man had come from Shiraz and had stood at the back of the men's room and had not stayed for the food.

I have not asked anybody to confirm that and I am not going to. I do not want a fact there. I have had the ninth word proved wrong and a daughter's name proved right in the same season and I have learned exactly how much I enjoy finding out.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the widow what her husband had said
to her in sixty years. She said, he brought the water
in. They said, yes, but what did he say. She said, . . .
. he brought the water in.*

105a.

On the three weeks between, which I did not know were three weeks.

She telephoned twice a week as she has for thirty years and neither call was any different from any of the four thousand before it.

She described a wedding she had not attended. She described the daughter of a neighbour and the daughter's husband and the husband's car and what the car said about the husband, and she was right, and it took four minutes, and I laughed twice.

The last thing my mother said to me on a telephone, on the Tuesday, at about six in the evening, was that I should eat something and that the curtains were still wrong.

105b.

I did not know. I want that down. There was no sign, there was nothing in her voice, she was not saying goodbye, and I have listened to the recording — because everything in this flat is a recording now — four times, and there is nothing in it.

Which I have decided is the last thing she did for me, and which is exactly her, and which cannot be proved.

105c.

The chehelom was in Esfand and I did not go to that either.

I sat in the flat with Simin four days into her employment, and she did not ask why I was not going, and she made lunch, and at about three in the afternoon she said, from the other room, that she had put down that I had not eaten.

106.

Roshanak stayed nineteen days, which broke something expensive in California, and on the last four of them she interviewed eleven people without telling me.

She told me afterwards, in the kitchen, that she had asked all eleven the same two questions. The first was what they thought

about working for a man who could not see. The second was what I did for a living.

Ten of them had found out beforehand and had something ready about Romanu.

The eleventh said she did not know what that was, and asked whether it affected my medication.

107.

Her name is Simin.

She is thirty-four. She was three years into medicine when her father became ill and she left and did not go back, and she has done private care for nine years, and she is completely and permanently unimpressed by me.

She has never heard of any of it. She does not watch anything. When Roshanak explained, in the kitchen, at some length, what I have been doing since 2007, Simin listened to the whole thing and then said that it must be difficult to know whether it had worked.

Which is the single most accurate sentence anybody has said to me in forty years, and she said it while putting shopping away, and she does not know she said it.

108.

She does not find things funny.

Not out of severity — the faculty is largely absent, the way it was in my father, and she is aware of it and does not mind and has no anxiety about it whatsoever. I have made perhaps two hundred remarks in this flat since Bahman and she has responded to four.

But the four were things I did not intend.

Which means that for the first time since my father stopped reading my pages there is an instrument in this room that cannot be flattered, cannot be led, has no idea what I am for, and goes off only when something is actually funny by accident.

I have had a machine telling me *this is good work* every night for two years and I have known it was worthless and asked it anyway.

She is worth eleven of it.

109.

And she keeps a log.

Hardbound, ruled, dated. Medication times, meals, sleep, temperature, mood, incidents.

Because that is what the work requires. She showed it to me — described it to me, rather — on the second day, as a matter of procedure, so that I would know what was being written down about me in my own flat.

It is in the format my father used for sixty years.

I did not tell her that. I have not told her that. I have listened to her rule a line under Thursday for four months and I have said nothing at all, and I intend to go on saying nothing, because the moment I tell her she will know she is doing something and she will stop doing it the same way.

109a.

What she is actually like, since she will be in these notebooks for as long as there are notebooks.

She is not warm. I want to get that in early because there is a version of a woman who looks after a blind old man that everybody has in their head and she is not it and she would be insulted by it.

She arrives at eight. She says good morning in the tone of a person reporting a fact. She does the work, which is considerable, and she does it in an order that does not vary, and she has never once in four months asked me how I am feeling, which I have come to understand is not coldness but a professional position: she can see how I am feeling, it is her trade, and asking would be inviting me to perform it.

109b.

She tells me things straight.

When the man from the hospital telephoned in Dey with the results of a thing, she took the call and then came in and told me the whole of it in about nine sentences, in order, worst first, with no preamble and no softening and no pause for me to brace.

I asked her afterwards whether she had been taught to do it that way.

She said no, she had been taught the opposite, and that she had watched the opposite being done to her father for eleven months in a hospital in Karaj and had formed her own view.

109c.

She reads. She reads a great deal and she reads properly — she is four months into a Russian novel of considerable length and is on her second pass, and she took a first pass at Sa'di last year because a man in her building said something about it that she thought was wrong.

She has never read anything of mine. She has never read anything of anybody's that anybody sold. When Roshanak explained the trade to her, in this kitchen, she asked two questions, and the second one was whether the people who say the jokes know they did not write them.

I said some of them do.

She said: **and the ones who do not?**

109d.

She finds almost nothing funny.

I have been keeping my own count alongside hers, which is a thing I have not told her and will not. In four months I have made two hundred and eleven remarks in this flat that were built to land, and she has gone at four of them.

Not one of the four was built. One was a thing I said about the fourth stair. One was a thing about the cap. One was something I said to the machine and not to her at all. And the fourth was on the ninth of Bahman and I have not been able to reconstruct what it was, and I have listened to the recording twice, and it is not in it, which means she laughed at something I did off the record and I will never know what.

109e.

Which means I now have in this flat, at sixty-seven, after forty years of a trade built entirely on producing a thing in people, **an instrument that cannot be flattered, cannot be led, does not know what I am, has no interest in the answer, and goes off only by accident.**

My father had the same equipment. My father read every page I wrote for forty-four years and never went at one of them, and laughed once, in 1989, at nine words he could not explain, and spent sixty years trying to work out why in a notebook nobody was meant to find.

I have had the machine downstairs telling me *this is good work* every night for two years in his voice, and I have known for two years that it is worth nothing, and I have asked it every night anyway.

She is worth eleven of it and she would not understand the sentence.

110.

On the ninth of Esfand she said, from the doorway, that she had put down that I had been talking to somebody at night.

I said yes.

She waited to see whether there was more, and there was not, and she wrote it down and ruled a line under it and asked whether I wanted the second pillow.

111.

Twenty to eleven. The chair, which is from my mother's front room and which now has nobody's front room behind it.

The radio at the volume where you can hear that a man is talking and not what he is saying, which is a setting I chose in about 2009 for reasons of concentration and which has turned out to be the arrangement I will die under.

The bottle. The cap, which holds five millilitres and has ridges on the outside for grip as though the situation might become slippery.

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

112.

And at three the room goes quiet the way a house does when somebody competent arrives.

And these days two things come through that door and they come through it together and there is no instrument left in this building that can tell me which is which — and one of them sets a joke down in front of me, complete, with the operative word already in the last position, and the other one sits on the arm of the sofa and says the sofa has always been too low.

I take them both down.

113.

Simin reads the letter to me on Fridays. Twice, as instructed.

She has no idea who wrote it and has never asked, and she reads it in the flat voice of a woman reading a document, with no emphasis anywhere, which is the only way I have ever been able to stand hearing it.

Not this year. But not never.

114.

The lawyer came on a Tuesday, which Payam noticed and mentioned to nobody.

He did not open the bag in front of the man. He signed what there was to sign, confirmed that yes, he was the person named, and that yes, he had a brother, and saw him out — and then locked the shop in the middle of the afternoon for the first time in eleven years.

Then he opened it.

And what he said, out loud, to an empty room in Shiraz, with a fortune on the counter between a gutted Telefunken and a tin of screws, was: **this is too much, I couldn't.**

He said it three times. There was nobody there.

Ta'ārof does not require an audience. That is the thing nobody outside understands about it and the thing nobody inside has ever had to have explained. It is not performance and it is not manners. It is a reflex installed in childhood and it fires on an empty room, at three in the afternoon, in a locked shop, in front of a gutted Telefunken — the protocol arriving in his hands before it reached his head, and his hands are fifty-seven years old and were raised properly, and they refused a bag of gold on behalf of a man who had spent twenty years waiting for somebody to give him anything at all.

Three refusals. The third is the last one that is not meant.

He made all three and then sat there on the wrong side of the counter with nobody to accept from.

Then he sat down on the floor of his own shop and laughed until he had to hold on to the leg of the counter — for the better part of a minute, at nothing — which is a noise his father made exactly once, in a scrapyard off the Khavaran road, in the August before Payam was born.

He has never heard it. He will not be told.

He opened the shop at eight the next morning.

GLOSSARY

Abādeh [aa-baa-DEH] — a town on the road between Isfahan and Shiraz.

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

Anfarādi [an-fa-raa-DEE] — Persian, *individual, solitary*. Solitary confinement.

Āzar [aa-ZAR] — Persian. The ninth month of the Iranian calendar, at the start of winter.

Bahār-e Āzādi [ba-HAAR-e aa-zaa-DEE] — Persian, *spring of freedom*. The standard Iranian gold coin, minted since 1979 and held by ordinary households as a store of value against the currency.

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

Bannā [ban-NAA] — Persian, *builder, mason*. A tradesman who builds; by long usage, also a man who begins work in your house and is still there a year later.

Bārān [baa-RAAN] — Persian, *rain*. A common modern given name.

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

Chehelom [che-he-LOM] — Persian, *the fortieth*. The memorial gathering held forty days after a death, and generally the last of the formal ones.

Cheshm [CHESHM] — Persian, *eye*. Also, said alone, *yes, of course, at once* — a contraction of **be roo-ye cheshm** [be ROO-ye CHESHM], *upon my eye*, a formula of assent offering the speaker's own eye as the surface the thing may be carried out on.

Dallāl [da-LAAL] — Arabic via Persian, *broker, middleman*.

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

Dey [DAY] — Persian. The tenth month of the Iranian calendar, at the depth of winter.

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

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

Gomrok [gom-ROK] — Persian, *customs*. A district in south-central Tehran, named for the customs house.

Hāji [HAA-jee] — Arabic via Persian. A respectful form of address for an older man, in practice used for almost any older man regardless of pilgrimage.

Hässelby [HESS-el-bee] — a suburb in the far west of Stockholm.

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

Khāvarān [khaa-vaa-RAAN] — a road and industrial district in the far south-east of Tehran.

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

Kur [KOOR] — Persian, *blind*. The blunt word, and generally the one used when the person is not in the room.

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

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

Nābinā [naa-bee-NAA] — Persian, *without sight*. The courteous word, and the one that appears on forms.

Narmak [nar-MAK] — a district in the north-east of Tehran.

Nāzi Ābād [NAA-zee aa-BAAD] — a district in the south of Tehran.

Pesar khāleh [pe-SAR khaa-LEH] — Persian, *maternal aunt's son*; a cousin. Also the name of a television glove puppet who is not, in fact, anybody's cousin — and, capitalised, the name Manuchehr Delgoshā and Roshanak Azimi gave the writing engine built out of his father's notebook.

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

Qom [GHOM] — a city south of Tehran, and the country's principal centre of religious learning.

Resāleh [reh-saa-LEH] — Arabic via Persian, *treatise*. A short prose work on a single subject.

Resāleh-ye Delgoshā [reh-saa-LEH-ye del-go-SHAA] — *The Heart-Delighting Treatise*. Obeid Zakani, mid-fourteenth century: short anecdotes satirising judges, preachers and the conspicuously pious. Extensively obscene, and bowdlerised in most editions printed since, the omissions marked with rows of dots.

Romanu [ro-maa-NOO] — the name that appears on the material Manuchehr Delgoshā and Roshanak Azimi make together: the first syllable of her name and the last two of his, arrived at by a broker in a hurry and never corrected by either of them.

Sekkeh [sek-KEH] — Persian, *coin*. In ordinary speech, a gold coin held as savings.

Shahrivar [shah-ree-VAR] — Persian. The sixth month of the Iranian calendar, at the end of summer.

Shirāz [shee-RAAZ] — a city in the south-west of Iran, capital of Fars province, some nine hundred kilometres from Tehran.

Ta'ārof [ta-AA-rof] — Arabic via Persian, *mutual acquaintance*. The system of ritual courtesy in which an offer is refused two or three times before it is accepted, and in which the third refusal is generally the last one that is not meant.

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

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

Yousefābād [yoo-sef-aa-BAAD] — a district in central Tehran.

Zakāni, Obeid [o-BAYD zaa-kaa-NEE] — c. 1300-1371. Persian poet and satirist from Qazvin. Author of the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, of *Akhlāq al-Ashrāf*, and of *Mush-o-Gorbeh*.

Manuchehr Delgoshā has written four hundred thousand jokes and has never said one out loud. At sixty-seven, the syrup he has poured every night for forty years takes his eyes.

The dark does not stay empty. Brickwork first. Then tile. Then pages of beautiful writing that say nothing at all. Then, at three in the morning, his brother sits down on the arm of the sofa and says the sofa has always been too low.

Payam has been gone twenty years — arrested for eleven words Manu wrote and could not claim. He has notes. He is wrong about the third beats. He is not there.

Their mother is ninety-four and has never made a joke in her life. She asks one question about the man who has moved into her son's eyes, and it is the only correct thing anybody says all year.

After forty years he finally has an audience. Every one of them has its back to him.

