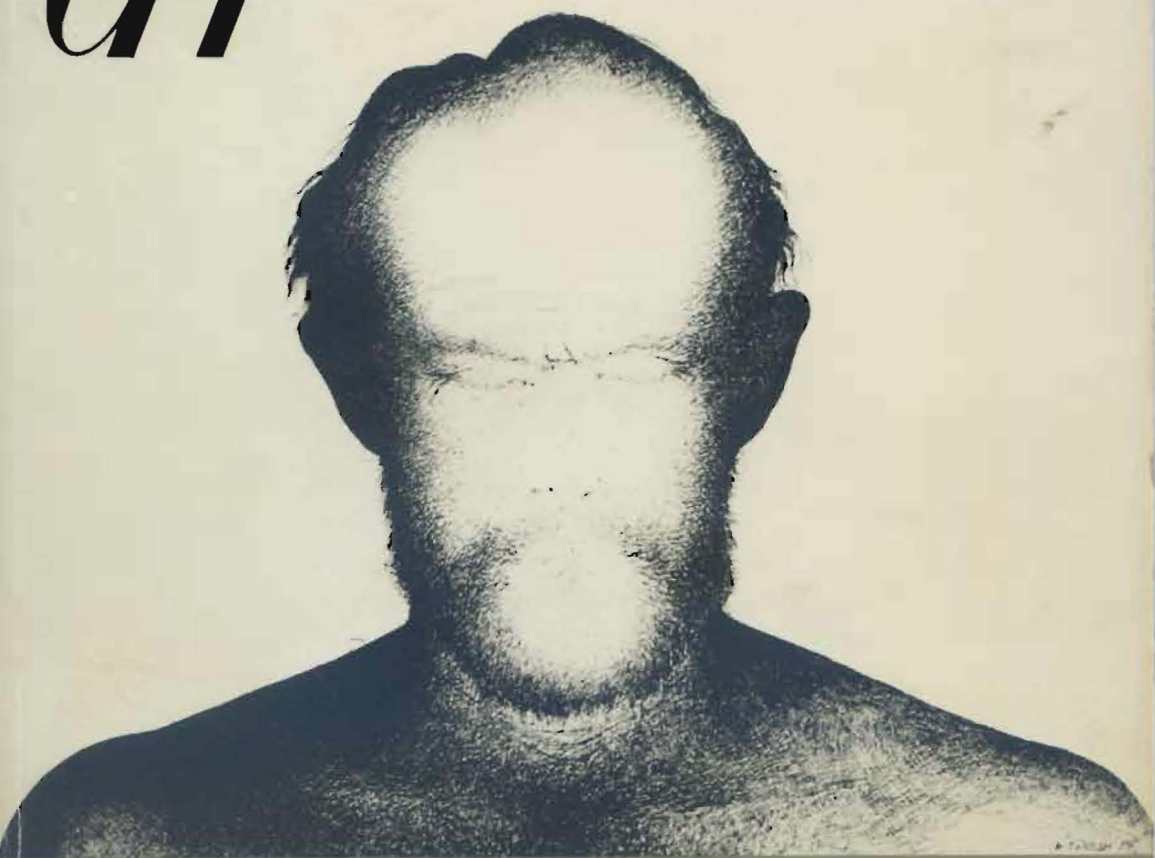


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A SIMPLE DEATH

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MR. HOSSEINI WAS ASLEEP when a small artery in the right hemisphere of his brain burst, signaling the start of his slow death. His unconscious promptly began informing him of that fact, and he dreamt that he stood on the windowsill of his apartment looking down at a crowd. "Is my wife down there?" he asked. "No . . . good." He relaxed and casually took a step into empty space. Still, the unconscious wasn't satisfied.

Mr. Hosseini used his small fingernail to pick at the sleep seeds which of late felt like pine needles. He opened his caked-up eyes. It was eight thirty-five, Sunday morning, and it was going to be his last day alive. Not that he felt sick or any worse than he would have felt any other day. It was more the case that, overnight, he had simply lost the will to live and couldn't figure out why. So clear was this awareness that he had an overpowering impulse to oversee his own death. Crazy, he thought. Old men don't commit suicide. Only young, mixed-up kids do that. You read about them in the paper. Eighteen-year-olds jumping off bridges. Imagine a seventy-year-old man throwing himself out of an apartment in Quincy. He could see the newspaper headline: Elderly Iranian immigrant jumps to death from third story. No, he would never create a scene. It wouldn't be fair to his wife and daughter. He could imagine them as they approached the crowd, chattering away after a weekend with relatives. Their eyebrows would arch, for an instant, with curiosity, and then, his wife's face would drop; she'd know something was wrong even when there wasn't anything wrong.

He rubbed his fists into both eyes and swung his legs down to put on his slippers. The right slipper was there beside the little red table. He bent over nearly double to look under the bed for the left one. The blood rushed into his head; ". . . three, four, five . . .," said his temples, "you are still alive." He flipped the bedspread and the lint balls twirled momentarily around a common center. Underneath the bed there was the box for the electric blanket, his nephew's spring exerciser, and, far back, hung the fringed ends of the blue, cretonne bedspread. But the left slipper was not there. Everything was quiet with his wife and daughter away. Frowning, he went around to his wife's side of the bed. Smells changed (the odors a little richer, a little creamier). Her bright blue, fluffy mules point-

ed neatly outward from their place under the nightstand. He placed his feet carefully in them, then he got into his brown checked dressing gown and went to the kitchen to prepare tea.

He put the water on the stove and sat at the table waiting for the kettle to boil. Ungenerous life! he thought. Waiting this long to show its true face: the love of his life, his younger brother Esfand, army general, shot dead through his uniform by a flea-ridden mullah who couldn't wash his own asshole. Himself, standing behind the yellow immigration line, the image of a supplicant, to enter America, a world he wanted no part of. But why had he panicked and left? What would anyone have wanted with a retired pharmacist? He poured the boiling water in his glass. He missed his samovar. Of course none of this explained the urge to die. Not even an urge really. More a certainty. He wasn't some young boy confused about life or about himself. He knew what he felt. Today was going to be his last day alive. That was all that needed to be understood. Mr. Hosseini dipped the tea bag a few more times, then wrapped the soggy bag around the spoon squeezing it tight with the string to get the last bit of flavor. He liked strong tea. He could hang himself, he thought, but rejected the idea almost immediately. He had seen a few hangings in his time, years ago when it was performed as a kind of a word to the wise.

Reza, his cousin, had explained the way it worked in a matter-of-fact style, like a doctor explaining to his colleagues the onset of disease. As soon as the guard removes the support from under the prisoner's feet, the body falls rapidly under the force of its own weight. It comes to an abrupt halt at the taking of the rope's slack, and the neck breaks instantly. Crack. Reza had emphasized the "crack" with a simulated karate chop to his palm. And the prisoner, he said, dies painlessly. Mr. Hosseini poured some of the tea from the cup into the saucer and placed a sugar cube inside his right cheek. He drank noisily from the saucer, blowing and sucking to cool the hot tea. He kept the bitter liquid in his mouth long enough to mix with his sugary saliva. On the table, next to his wife's eyelash curler, lay her pocket-size cosmetic mirror. The double-sided mirror swung between a wishbone-shaped chrome holder. On one side was a concave mirror, the type which enlarged every pore. In it he saw a blurred image of the top of his head: it reminded him of the triplegic puppet village children held by the lone remaining limb, most of its hair loose. Showing through are the obscene pink patches of alopecia.

A surge of vanity almost made him fetch his dentures, but it was momentary. He moved his head back and forth, focusing the reflection of his unshaven cheek — now a lump around the sugar cube. The white hair bristled stiffly on his wizened face, each single hair visible and inches apart. Maybe a razor, he thought. He had heard that if you sit in a bathtub full of hot water, even the cutting

is painless. Apparently, one drifted away comfortably. Then he remembered, with a little pride at his own sense of detail, that the bathtub didn't retain water very well. What an ugly sight that would be: wife and daughter returning to find his body in an almost empty tub; his thin flabby buttocks and thighs displacing the red small lozenge-like puddles; blood clotted around his white-haired chest and genitals. And the stench of blood, for he remembered his brother's room the time Esfand had nearly bled to death from an intestinal ulcer.

The sugar had melted. He shuddered from the bitter taste of the tea. No, he couldn't kill himself violently. Not by cutting, hanging or jumping. These were methods for the young, who were after effect and attention. He just wanted to die with the least trouble to his family and the people around him. Gas was not an unattractive option, but the house didn't run on gas. No one in the house used sleeping pills. He was beginning to perceive the problem. This wasn't going to be easy. He flicked at the mirror, making it spin. The reflected light beam bounced jerkily around the room. He remembered the famous French magician, Dr. Gastonier, who had entertained the people in his town one evening close to half a century ago. The good doctor would flick open his pocket watch and, using the small mirror inside, hypnotize certain individuals in the crowd. All he had to do was focus the reflection on their foreheads. And the way he used to move objects by merely concentrating on them. "The real trick is that it must not be a trick," the magician would tell his audience confidently. For weeks afterwards he tried to move objects. He'd concentrate for hours at a time on a glass of water until he'd drop from exhaustion and frustration. The glass never budged a hair.

The fascination with his own mind-over-matter faded over the years and was replaced by a skeptical and practical mind. He spent a lifetime weighing and measuring drugs. Most of his business was centered around the neighborhood Armenian ladies. He sold his own shampoo which he made from castor oil and camphor spirits mixed in a viscous coal-tar solution. He also offered a special face cream, a mix of salicylic acid powder and sulphur powder, which had been a good seller. Since the days of Gastonier, only one incident had crossed the indistinct borders of the supersensible. The old woman who brought with her, like a first cold wind, the winter of his life.

It was a Spring evening, a week after his fifty-third birthday. Strolling outside the house, smoking his after-dinner cigarette, he noticed an old woman crossing the street towards him. As she drew near, he found himself absorbed in estimating her age, raising the figure as details sharpened in the dusk light. The skin on her face hung straight down, unwrinkled, like a stretched sheet of white dough. But the skin around her eyesockets was like the deep lunette

folds of a theater curtain. The eyes themselves were colored a dirty pearl and dull. The hollow bones were so delicate, he knew they could be snapped between thumb and forefinger. So vivid was the dilapidated figure that his mind was overwhelmed with her impending death. She is going to die tomorrow, he thought he had thought. She had only passed him by a few steps when he felt the blow of her cane on his back. "Stop saying that I tell you," she said. Turning, he saw two eyes glowing with life and defiance. But only for an instant. The eyes reverted to their earlier lifeless gaze. What was she holding onto so desperately? When he had caught pneumonia the next day, in his mind it was she who was to blame.

And looking back, he could confidently point, as if to an old photograph in an album: there, that was the week I became an old man. Today he would hold her in his arms like a child and comfort her. There really wasn't anything to worry about. It was easy.

At that last thought, Mr. Hosseini was once again jogged into the realm of practicality. He straightened his back. What's easy? It's not easy at all. There must be some way. I must think of a way out. Must think of a way out. THINK OF A WAY OUT, he smiled, shaking his head.

Maybe I could concentrate on dying. Now that would be a clean way for everybody.

The possibility intrigued him. He had the rest of the day to himself. He'd lie on his sofa, close his eyes and concentrate on the job. It would be easier than those youthful extensive bouts of concentration. Besides, he was older and much more patient. He took a last sip of the lukewarm tea, rinsed the cup squeaky clean with his index finger and walked to the darkened living room. He removed the slippers and lay back on the sofa, closing his eyes gratefully. He began to concentrate.

His last two conscious thoughts before dying were that his left slipper was under the laundry bag in the corner of the room, and that this method of dying wasn't difficult at all. The trick was that it must not be a trick.