Meg Mullins

The Rug

Ushman Khan doesn't like tourists. It is June, though, and tourist season in New York, and, as he double-parks his van outside Mrs. Roberts' apartment building, they are everywhere. Dressed in T-shirts and sandals, fancy cameras dangling from their necks, they run for awnings and bus stops as a hard rain begins to fall. Watching the chaos, Ushman smiles. He holds a newspaper over his head and, nearly dry, makes his way through the crowd.

Mrs. Roberts' maid comes to the door, letting Ushman into the cool, dark apartment. The girl is young and squat and motions for Ushman to follow her into the den. He has been here before and walks silently through the expansive apartment. In nearly every room there is a rug from his small showroom on Madison Avenue. They are comforting to him, each one reminding him of his wife. She is still in Tabriz, where she selects and commissions hand-knotted wool and embroidered kilim from the women in the bazaar and private workshops. Every month she ships two or three rugs to Ushman with a note that reads *Sell, Sell, Sell, Your Wife, Farak.*

Last year, when Mrs. Roberts and her husband moved across the park, she commissioned Ushman to cover all the floors in the new apartment. The job enabled Ushman to absorb the increase in the rent for his shop and nearly double his inventory, but he never liked being in Mrs. Roberts' apartment, with its high, echoing ceilings and drafty, perfumed air. And she had not been easy to please. Ushman must have hauled two dozen rugs into and out of the apartment after Mrs. Roberts had lived with them for a few days only to find their colors too muted, too bright, or just wrong. On these occasions, she seemed perversely pleased, as if she enjoyed finding flaws. And then, when Ushman rolled out the rug that was eventually to stay, Mrs. Roberts would appear in the doorway grimacing. Ushman, sweating and impatient, would ask, "Not this one, either?"

She'd bite her bottom lip and place both hands on her hips. Then, as she turned away, she'd say, without looking back, "It's perfect. It stays."

After he'd finished the project, Mrs. Roberts still kept in touch. Often, she would come by the shop with a friend of hers, winking at Ushman as the other

woman knelt to admire an expensive silk. Or she would call, asking about a rug's origin or care or something else that Ushman knew was on the appraisal documents he'd given her. This persistence made him anxious, made him think that maybe she would try to say he had cheated her or been dishonest. So, when Mrs. Roberts called this morning and asked him to come to the apartment right away, Ushman felt nothing but dread.

He waits for her in the den watching the rain fall in a dark haze over the park. It is an unusually cold day for late June and Ushman shivers, even in long sleeves. From a bedroom off the den, Mrs. Roberts appears just as Ushman is looking at his watch.

"You have somewhere to be," she says, more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, hello. An appointment." Then, with a gesture he learned from his father, Ushman raises his eyebrows and extends his arms towards her as if he were displaying a precious object. "But what may I do for you?"

Mrs. Roberts looks past him, out the window. "It's a terrible day to be working, Ushman," she says.

Ushman lowers his eyes, fiddles with the keys in his pocket. "You're right, a terrible day," he says.

Mrs. Roberts looks down at her feet. "I have grown a distaste for this rug," she says, walking across the center of it. "I want another."

Ushman smiles, tries hard to hide his irritation. "It's been over three months, Mrs. Roberts. The trial period is finished. You own the rug now."

"Oh, for goodness sakes, I know that. I don't want a refund, Ushman. This one will go to my niece, I think." She turns to look at the closed door from which she came, listens for a moment and then turns back to Ushman. "But," she says, pacing the length of the rug, "I wanted to remind you of the space so you could pick out an appropriate few and show them to me."

Ushman nods, but cannot contain his disapproval. The royal blue and red silk from Karaja truly belongs in the room. As any good rug should, it makes the room appear bigger, warmer, more textured. But, most importantly, it gives the room weight.

"This rug, though, in this room, I have never seen a more perfect match . . . " he begins.

Mrs. Roberts waves her hand at Ushman, signaling for quiet. She turns her head again toward the closed bedroom door. Ushman hears it just as she does—a dull thud, followed by a thin, scared voice calling for help. Mrs. Roberts places her hand on her chest, as if she were trying to keep something in place.

Ushman watches her jog awkwardly to the door, pull it open wide, and kneel next to a figure who is lying, nearly motionless, on the floor by the bed. He must have fallen out, Ushman thinks, and is startled by this part of Mrs. Roberts' life. Mrs. Roberts lifts the man's head into her lap, but he is still calling for help, his voice full of panic.

"I'm here, I'm here," she says and in one motion rings a small brass bell by the night stand, turns on the oxygen compressor, and positions the mask over the man's nose and mouth. The young maid comes running through the den and kneels next to Mrs. Roberts.

Ushman watches the two women as they try to negotiate the man back into bed. Not sure if he should look away in respect for their privacy, or eagerly volunteer to help, Ushman approaches quietly. Standing in the doorway, he sees that the man is white-haired, pale, wearing navy silk pajamas that are wrinkled and twisted around his long, thin frame.

"I think we need his help," the maid says, gesturing towards Ushman.

Mrs. Roberts looks up at Ushman, her face flushed and tense. Ushman steps forward.

"Please, then," she acquiesces, moving away from the man's head. "My husband," she says, absently watching Ushman slide his arms beneath the man's armpits and lift him back onto the bed, the maid holding his feet.

"Who's this?" Mr. Roberts says, pulling the oxygen mask away for a moment.

Mrs. Roberts strokes the hair away from his temples. "This is the rug merchant, sweetheart," she says quietly.

Mr. Roberts looks at Ushman, his thick white eyebrows raised in comprehension. "Ushman," he says, closing his eyes, a brief smile crossing his lips.

"That's right. Ushman is going to find us another beautiful rug, sweetheart," she says, carefully pronouncing her words.

Mrs. Roberts stands, showing Ushman out of the room. She is composed again and all business. "Until tomorrow, then," she says, smoothing her hair into place. Ushman nods and closes the door.

The rain passes momentarily, but the afternoon remains cold and dark. Ushman drives through the park, feeling as though he's seen something he shouldn't have. He had been grateful for Mrs. Roberts' formality, ushering him out quickly, the look in her eyes assuring him that she would not want to speak of this again, that he should not have been witness to any of it. Ushman thinks of

her husband's body, so small and weightless in his arms, and shudders realizing what he had been trusted with, if only for a moment.

Witnessing the interaction between Mrs. Roberts and her husband reminds Ushman of his last days in Tabriz, before he came to America. He would stand and watch, through the open bedroom door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Farak's hands as she bathed his mother. Silently stroking a washcloth up and down a limp leg, Farak would not acknowledge Ushman, even if she saw him. She would simply squeeze the dirty water out the open window and start on the other leg.

Ushman could not see his mother's face, and should not have even seen her feet, bare and twisted. But as Farak worked her hands over his mother's body, conceding gracefully to her sharp demands, Ushman kept watching, hoping for a look of clemency from Farak as she scrubbed and wiped.

He merges into traffic on the Queensboro Bridge, not having felt so alone since his first days in America. He was living with his cousin in Howard Beach, across the expressway from Kennedy Airport. The roar of jets startled him at first—picture frames and ashtrays buzzed against tabletops like the beginnings of an earthquake. On the small balcony the three rugs Farak had sent him were wrapped and huddled like refugees and Ushman had wondered if coming to America was the right thing. He missed Farak and worried that he would not be successful.

Each day had been the same and each day he cringed to think of Farak seeing him this way: riding the G train, passing out business cards that read *carpet merchant* under his name, passengers mistaking him for a beggar and offering him change. Then one day he sold the first kilim to an Italian man for five thousand dollars. He counted the hundreds over and over and wished he could take Farak to the big department store on Fifth Avenue and let her pick out a dress or some jewelry. He begged Farak to come then, to bring his invalid mother with her and move into the small apartment he'd found in Flatbush. But she told him she would not come until it was a better life than in Tabriz, where the money he sent them bought fresh vegetables, black market stockings and all his mother's medications. Then last year, when he'd done the job for Mrs. Roberts, and could promise Farak a two-bedroom apartment, she'd told him she still wasn't sure that America was the place for her. Ushman was beginning to understand, though, that it was not the country, but Ushman himself with whom she wasn't sure she belonged.

Yesterday Ushman brought a privately owned kilim to his shop, on inspection, and decided to buy it from the owner in Jackson Heights for twelve thousand dollars, knowing that it would bring nearly twenty in his shop. He has the cashier's check in his satchel and the rug in the back of his van. Ushman does not bargain. If the man will not accept the twelve thousand, he will give him back the rug and drive away.

As he turns the corner onto the man's block, Ushman notices a single ambulance, its lights flashing brightly against the dullness of the day. Approaching the house, he sees a stretcher being carried out of the same front door from which Ushman took the kilim yesterday. There is a figure on the stretcher, but it is covered by a thick white sheet. Ushman parks the van across the street and watches the paramedics load the stretcher, turn off the flashing lights, and drive away.

There is a young man, standing in the yard next door, smoking a cigarette. Ushman gets out of his van and asks the man what has happened.

"Heart attack. Quick and brutal," he says, snapping his fingers loudly, "like that."

"I'm so very sorry," Ushman says, backing away.

The young man shrugs, stamps out his cigarette. "Didn't know the dude," he says and turns to go inside.

Ushman sits in his van with both the money and the rug, his feet tingling. He cannot believe this turn of events; his good fortune. The man lived alone, probably has children living in another state who are just now being lifted by the gentle roar of a jet, and whose last concern will be a rug of which even their father didn't realize the value.

Impulsively, he drives away, back across the Queensboro bridge, remembering the makeshift stretchers that his village had made out of the kilim, and how, that day two and a half years ago he found Farak, still crouched, afraid to move, and bloodied when he finally rode back into Tabriz. Feeling as though it is that day again, and as though now he might be able change that day's events, he drives even faster.

Farak had had her fifth miscarriage early that morning, just before the earthquake. When the house began to shudder Farak knelt in the bathroom doorway, already weeping, and watched the roof crumble on either side of her. Ushman's mother was in bed still, and her spine was crushed beneath the weight of the dirt roof.

Ushman had been in Karaja, a small mountain village near Tabriz that has no road access, where he ran another small workshop. He had two Karaja rugs tethered to his saddle bags and was descending the mountain when the camel stopped and sat down.

Hours later, when Ushman found his damaged house, and saw Farak so bloody, he was afraid that she had been badly hurt. She was crying, though, and he knew that was a good sign. But as he held her to him, dragging her out of the rubble, he understood that beneath her whimpers, she was saying, *the baby, the baby.*

Kneeling in front of a loom for all of her childhood, at the demand of Ushman's father, had misshapen Farak's pelvis so badly that doctors told her a baby's skull would be crushed if she attempted vaginal childbirth. Farak had accepted this fact, but so far she had not even been able to carry a fetus beyond the first trimester. Though the doctors could offer no medical explanation for this, Farak insisted it must have the same origin as her misshapen pelvis.

More than thirty-five thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and Ushman wanted to blame the miscarriage on it as well.

"No," Farak said as they stood over his mother's hospital bed, "it happened before the earthquake."

"We will try again," Ushman said placing his hand on Farak's back.

"It's no good, Ushman. I will lose the baby each time. Don't make me lose another one to prove it to you," Farak said and lowered her head.

Ushman spent the week before they brought his mother home from the hospital rebuilding his own roof, and helping other men in the village begin the clean-up. Both of Ushman's workshops were destroyed and four of his weavers were dead. There was no electricity, so Ushman spent the evenings lying in bed, hoping Farak would understand that the miscarriage was his sorrow, too. But she would come in late from speaking with neighbor women in the courtyard, and take Ushman's cigarette from between his fingers, grinding it into the dirt floor without a word.

After the earthquake, Ushman decided to try his hand as a merchant. It would be costly for him to rebuild his workshops, and he knew the merchants sold the rugs in Tehran and Kashan for twice what they paid Ushman. Farak suggested America. "They are rich there. You can sell the kilim for four times what we get here."

They were finishing a dinner of lentil stew. Ushman looked up from his bowl. "I cannot go to America alone. I have responsibilities here."

"Your mother is my responsibility. You can go and I will send you the kilim each month."

"You will get cheated," Ushman said and lifted the bowl to his face, pouring the remaining lentil broth down his throat.

"I will buy from the women. They will not cheat me."

"And when my mother dies you will come?" Ushman asked under his breath.

"Don't talk of that," Farak said and cleared away their bowls. Three months later, Ushman was sleeping on a mat in his cousin's apartment in Queens.

Last year in a letter from his mother, Ushman learned of the Turkish tailor from Tehran who had come to the house. His mother told Ushman that the tailor had visited Tabriz three times that fall, and that each time she could hear him and Farak talking in the dim courtyard while her own neck cramped up, long overdue for her nightly massage. Ushman wished his mother would die.

His store is nothing more than a desk, a chair, and a small stack of rugs. Ushman sets the stolen rug down near his desk, still unable to believe the afternoon's events. He unrolls the rug, though, and is startled by its beauty. It is a Kashan Ardabil Shrine design carpet, semi-antique, probably made in the late 1960s. Ushman notices that the first two stanzas of Shiraz's ghazal that were woven into the border of the original Ardabil Shrine carpet in 1539 are typed in English on a sheet of stationery and stitched to the back. Ushman reads over the verses, remembering having to learn them in grade school.

When he examined the rug last night, he knew immediately that it was authentic and had only checked the fibers to verify its age and condition. Now, in the daylight of his shop, the rug's golden red tones are brilliant. He does not regret his decision. In its weave, he sees the marketplace of Tabriz, the early days of his marriage, the easy way in which Farak would lay their dinner dishes, light a candle, steep his tea, all while holding his gaze across the kitchen table. Anyway, he tells himself, the Ardabil rug would have been sold for a fraction of its value at some early morning estate sale where it could never mean as much to the buyer as it does to Ushman. The rug had been meant for him.

Excited and lonely, he cannot help himself from placing the call to Tabriz, though he knows it will wake her.

"Farak?" he says to the sleepy distant voice that picks up.

"Ushman, what has happened to you?"

He instinctively changes the story a little. "I got an Ardabil kilim for free today. I was going to give him twelve thousand for it, but . . . he left town,

Farak. A twenty-thousand dollar kilim, he leaves it behind." When she is silent, Ushman adds, "With me."

"Nothing is for free, Ushman."

"How is my mother?" Ushman replies.

"Like a sack of bones," Farak says. "If you sell the Shrine rug, perhaps you will then have enough money to pay a nurse." He has not expected this. Ushman is afraid his mother is right, that Farak has a lover in Tehran who will never make her touch another kilim as long as she lives. Perhaps it is only her duty that keeps her in Tabriz, caring for Ushman's invalid mother. But, then, it is also her duty to love him, Ushman reasons and holds onto this thought as he invents other ways to spend the money.

"I could use a bigger shop," Ushman says and Farak doesn't reply. "Or perhaps I could come for a visit, like a vacation."

"Since when is Tabriz a vacation spot, Ushman? Come if you have to, not for the scenery."

He does not know what to say, but is glad that he cannot see her eyes, which, even on the morning he left Tabriz for his long journey to America, had been full of blame. She had allowed him to lift her veil and place one kiss on her dry lips before she covered her face again. It was their only act of marital intimacy since the earthquake, as she was still in mourning for the lost baby.

Ushman had hoped for children, but he did not need them if he had Farak. Though he understood why she held him and his family's workshops responsible, he did not agree. The kilim had been good to Ushman and his family. The kilim had brought Farak to him the first time, and he was sure that the Ardabil would bring her back again.

Farak had been a weaver in Ushman's father's workshop in Tabriz from the time she was seven years old. Her small hands maneuvered the thread expertly, spinning and dying wool in the evening and weaving every day. When Ushman was thirteen he accompanied his father into the workshop to inspect the women's progress. Farak was squatting over the loom, her veil hanging low over her forehead, tying the tight little knots that Ushman's father and the merchants from Tehran raved about.

Outside one day soon after, Ushman spotted Farak sketching a design in the dirt. He approached, and told her she had lovely technique, the highest compliment Ushman had ever heard his father give to a woman. She was humbled by his attention and lowered her eyes in respect. His big feet, the toes clumsily

hanging over the edge of each leather sandal, must have moved her and she dared to let a smile spread beneath her veil before returning to her work.

When his father died, Ushman married Farak and took over the workshops. She continued to weave for him until the workshops were destroyed.

Unsure what to do, Ushman rolls the Ardabil rug back up and places it in a corner. If he sells the rug for what it's worth, he can afford to pay a nurse for the rest of his mother's life. He can almost afford it now. But the only reason for a nurse is to set Farak free, and Ushman, although he has not seen her for two years, cannot imagine that.

He never should have told Farak about the rug, Ushman thinks to himself. He must be more careful of his urges.

The next morning, summer is back and the air is thick with humidity. The hot months are always slow, but Ushman has not even read the headlines of his morning paper before someone rings at the door. It is Mrs. Roberts, dressed in white linen. She waves at Ushman through the glass door and he buzzes her in. He did not expect her until later; she has never come before noon.

She greets him as if she has not seen him in weeks. He bows, relieved that they are back on familiar territory. She looks around his shop, then to the window. He turns and follows her gaze across the street to a man and woman arguing over a taxi cab.

"I must confess," she finally says, removing a compact from her handbag, "I'm a terrible voyeur. We live so high that people on the street become nothing more than movement. But here, you're so close to the street, it's really quite mesmerizing, isn't it?"

Mrs. Roberts looks at Ushman with strangely bright eyes. It makes him suspicious, this look. He watches as she drags the thick powder across her nose. There is something terribly ugly about her face, Ushman thinks, something wide and shameful. He has never liked the looks of American women. He thinks of Farak: her delicate face, strong hands, and the small feet which crossed the dirt floor of their bedroom at night in hushed strides.

Abruptly, Mrs. Roberts closes her compact, turns away from the window and looks around her at the few rugs hanging and the stack just behind her. Then, Ushman sees her eyes rest on the Ardabil rug, rolled tightly in the corner. "So," she says with her face already in a firmly established smile, "is this the one you've found for me?"

He is not prepared for this, has not yet decided just what he will do with the rug. But he understands there is no way to deny her. She smiles insistently. Ushman pulls the rug into the middle of the room, then gives it a kick and watches as it unrolls. It has one large medallion in the center surrounded by a sea of delicate flowers. The threads are warm shades of red and gold.

Mrs. Roberts' smile fades into some sort of astonishment. Ushman is proud of the rug's effect.

"It is a replica of one of the Ardabil Shrine rugs, woven in the sixteenth century. The original is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London."

"It's the most wonderful-looking thing I've ever seen," Mrs. Roberts says, kneeling to touch the rug. Ushman kneels next to her, pleased that she appreciates the rug's value. Whatever anxiety Ushman has around Mrs. Roberts, she also makes him feel proud of his shop, his rugs. He wishes that Farak could see the way Mrs. Roberts looks at the kilim, at him. Perhaps such an important woman's esteem would change the way Farak feels about Ushman and the rugs.

As Mrs. Roberts extends a hand to touch the Ardabil, Ushman notices the skin, wrinkled and spotted, her fingers beginning to bend under the force of swollen knuckles. He looks at her face, smooth and covered in a heavy layer of makeup, which, instead of giving her a more youthful appearance, Ushman thinks, makes her look raw and somehow vulnerable.

"What's this?" she asks, looking at the small yellowed paper stitched to the backside.

"It was woven into the original," Ushman says quietly.

She reads aloud, "*Except for your threshold, there is no refuge in this world for me; except for this door, there is no shelter for my head. When the enemy's sword is drawn, I throw down my shield in flight because I have no weapon except weeping and sighing.*" She looks at Ushman. "It takes your breath away, doesn't it?"

"They are nice verses," Ushman says and stands, "we studied them as children, but I was never very good in school."

"What is the price?" Mrs. Roberts suddenly asks, standing next to him, her eyes wide with desire.

Ushman panics. She is close to him, her lipstick melting into the wrinkles around her mouth, a hint of staleness creeping into her minty breath.

Impulsively, Ushman names his price, "Thirty thousand."

Mrs. Roberts' face relaxes into a frown, but she doesn't flinch. She has never questioned Ushman's fairness. "Fine," she says, disappointed. Then, with a pleading in her voice, she asks, "Why do you make it so easy for me, Ushman?"

"What do you mean?" he says, astonished that she has agreed to such a high figure.

"You always find the perfect rug. This one, it's like nothing I could have even imagined."

"You are a good customer," Ushman says, turning his gold signet ring around and around. He is elated at the thought of so much money. He cannot believe that such wealth will not change Farak's mind. "I can see you love the rug," he says, feeling as though he is finally in control of his fortune.

Mrs. Roberts' face is quiet, though, even stern and Ushman thinks maybe she's changed her mind. He tempers his own emotion, afraid of betraying himself. She looks at him hard.

"I thought that maybe it wouldn't even be for sale," she says quietly turning away from Ushman and the rug. He intuits that something has happened, and he's sure that it must be his fault, but Ushman just stands looking at the ridges of her shoulder blades move beneath her tunic as she shifts in distress. Though her eyes are clear and dry when she turns to face him again, Ushman begins to understand that wanting is its own luxury.

And suddenly, Ushman is sure of what Mrs. Roberts is asking him to do. He feels generous, standing over the rug, the sun making his shop warm and bright. "You're right," Ushman begins, watching her face for a response, "it is special to my family." She raises her eyebrows, alert, encouraging. "I'll have to check with my wife, you know," he continues, "give me a few days."

Mrs. Roberts seems quite pleased with this revelation, and her eyes fix on the rug with what Ushman recognizes as longing. They stand in silence for a moment and then, with the artificial formality that occurs between two people aware of a lie, Ushman and Mrs. Roberts say their good-byes.

The next evening, Ushman sits in his bedroom with the window open listening to his downstairs neighbor practice the clarinet. He is drinking coffee. At midnight, he will call Farak as he does each month. It will be morning there, his mother barking out requests from her bed. Ushman has no nostalgia for his mother. He knows that each time Farak lays her hands on the old woman's greasy skin, massaging a stiff neck or arm, Farak's disdain for him hardens. If his mother hadn't been crippled, he might have brought Farak to America with him and let the fresh flowers and hot dogs on street corners lull her into forgiveness. It would be easier to love him here, where the rumblings outside are planes and trucks and where doctors work miracles every day. She could

watch the talk shows on TV and see that there are men much worse than he. And they could sit together in the shop on the rugs from their past and dream about the people on the street they wished they were, but would not know how to be.

Ushman still believes in that dream. He did not come to America to lose his wife, he came to make a better life for both of them. He knows that after he plays her game, Mrs. Roberts will give him thirty thousand for the rug and with that money, Ushman can give Farak what she wants.

In the dark, Ushman feels close to her and sure of himself. When it is time, he places the call. He can hear the radio in the background as Farak answers.

"Ushman," she says, "how are you?"

"I'm well. How are you?"

"Your mother has a bit of a cold, but she is fine. She is sleeping now."

"What are you listening to?"

"The Beatles. Semah loaned me the tape."

"I could send you some tapes. Elvis, too."

"That would be nice. What happened with the Ardabil rug, Ushman?"

"Oh. One of my customers is very interested and she will even pay more than the rug is worth. She's a little crazy, Farak."

"Crazier than you and me?"

"She's very rich. She can have anything she wants."

"To be crazy like that, Ushman. Oh, if only we were crazy like that."

Ushman listens to Farak's lazy voice, the tinny *yeah, yeah, yeah,* of the Beatles in the background. He thinks of Mrs. Roberts and how she had been able to make him understand that she wanted to lose sleep over the rug, to worry that she might not be able to have it for her own. He wants to tell Farak that they can be crazy like that; that they will be rich and crazy together in America. But something stops him. Ushman longs to see Farak—her face, her hands, her eyes. If he could see her, maybe he could understand her, too. Finally, in a hesitant voice, he asks what he's never before dared, what he realizes he's never known. "What is it that you want, Farak?"

The line is silent except for the music and Farak's quiet breathing. "It's not that easy, Ushman. Things just happen, no matter what you want."

"Tell me what's happened, then," Ushman says, his heart racing.

The music clicks off and Farak's voice quivers, "I'm carrying a baby again, Ushman."

Ushman listens to the little sobs she tries to muffle. "The Turk's?" he finally asks.

She doesn't say anything.

"You will lose it like the rest," Ushman spits into the phone. He can hear a small whine of pain and then there is quiet.

"Farak?" Ushman says, looking out his window, wondering why he ever left Tabriz.

She breathes heavily into the phone, but does not respond. "There's your mother calling," Farak says finally, her voice weak. "I've got to get her pills, Ushman."

He calls her name again, but she hangs up.

Ushman's chest heaves in anger. He stands up, as if movement will calm the burning in his stomach where her words have nested. He stomps his feet and shakes his head, fighting back tears until he is worn out and the cries of a child next door startle him into silence.

He gets to the shop before the morning has really gotten started. Bicycles whir through the streets unhindered and dogs pee on the corner of every mailbox and newsstand as their owners follow sleepily in sneakers and sweat pants. The Ardabil rug is in the center of the shop, its brilliant red and gold threads taunting Ushman.

In the quiet of night, when the breeze still blew hot through the window and Ushman's body was limp on the bed, he realized that the rug had tested him. How far, it had asked, would he go for Farak. He had been thinking of nothing but her and of the earthquake as he drove back into the city, the dead man's rug in the back of his van. He'd thought the rug was a stroke of luck. That's why he had played Mrs. Roberts' game and that's why he had called Farak to tell her of his find, and that's why he'd had the nerve to ask her what he never had before. And that stupid lucky feeling made him a bigger fool now than ever.

Looking at the rug, he thinks of the dead man whose face he cannot even remember. He thinks of the thousands of knots, the fingers that tied them, fingers like Farak's that have stroked the skin of another man. He rolls up the rug, heaves it onto his shoulder and stands on the avenue, waiting.

He knows their schedule and the truck pulls up just as he's beginning to break a sweat. The streets are still empty but they're at the end of their route

and the truck is nearly full. He places the rug on top of the six trash bags and watches as the sanitation worker stops to inspect the rug.

"It's trash," Ushman says, "terrible stains. Worthless really."

Wiping his brow, the man looks at Ushman, then at the rug again.

"Please," Ushman says and raises his voice to a tone of urgency, "just take it."

The worker shrugs. "Whatever, guy," he says and throws the Ardabil up and into the compactor. Ushman stands listening to the motor and he imagines the rug, crushed between eggshells and dirty diapers, its proud design soiled by other people's filth.

As he's sure she would, Mrs. Roberts shows up before noon, inquiring about the rug.

Ushman notices that she is bright, hopeful that the rug may continue to be out of her reach for a little longer. It makes Ushman angry, that to want something she can't have is an indulgence, a fantasy he was willing to humor. He no longer feels generous or kind and so he turns to her with a somber face and says, "It's gone. You cannot covet it or pretend to covet it any longer."

"Oh," she says, shocked by his tone. "Well, I certainly didn't mean to offend you." She stands her ground and makes no move to leave.

"I am not playing," Ushman says, "It's really gone. So go try to find something else in this city that you can't have."

Mrs. Roberts smiles stiffly at Ushman. He remembers that she is older than her face looks; he remembers that her husband is at home, dying, and yet she's here, with him.

Having been up all night is beginning to make his head buzz, his knees feel loose. He sits down on the small stack of rugs, stretches his arms out the way his father taught him, and pleads, "What do you want?"

She doesn't answer but steps out of her shoes, walks across the room and sits next to him. Exhausted, he lies down, turning his back to her. Without speaking, Mrs. Roberts moves her body close to Ushman, careful not to touch him. She lies there next to him, the way a wife would, in silence. Ushman closes his eyes. He thinks of the window on the other side of the room, and of the people who, seeing the two of them there, like lovers on the small pile of rugs, are undoubtedly longing to trade places.