THE WHITE SHIP

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He had two tales. One was his own, unknown to anybody else. The other he had heard from grandfather. Then one day both were gone. That's what this story is about.

He was seven years old, going on eight.

First came the schoolbag. A black imitation-leather schoolbag, with a shiny metal snaplock that slipped into a catch. With an outside pocket for small things. A most extraordinary ordinary schoolbag. That was, perhaps, the beginning of it all.

Grandfather bought it from the visiting store truck, which made the rounds of the cattle breeders in the mountains and occasionally looked in on the forest post in the San-Tash Valley.

Beyond the post, the forest preserve rose densely up the slopes and ravines to the mountaintops. There were only three households here, but once in a long while the store truck would visit the foresters.

The only boy in the post, he was always the first to see the truck.

"It's coming!" he would shout into the doors and windows. "The store truck is coming!"

The road that wound its way here from the banks of the Issyk-Kul Lake ran through deep gorges, along the riverbank, over rocks and gulleys, all the way. It was a very difficult road. When it came to Outlook Mountain, it went up slantwise from the bottom of the canyon, then made a long descent down the steep, bare slope toward the forest post. Outlook Mountain was near the post. In the summer, the boy climbed up there almost daily to watch the lake through his binoculars. And the road could be seen from the mountain as plain as the palm of his hand—the curves and turns, the rare pedestrians, the riders, and, of course, the cars.

This time—it was a hot summer day—the boy was swimming in his pond when he caught sight of the truck raising dust as it came down the slope. The pond was at the edge of the river, where the water ran shallow over the gravel bottom. Grandpa had dammed it up with rocks. If it were not for the dam, who knows, the boy may have been drowned a long time ago. And, as grandma kept saying, the river would have washed his bones white and carried them away to Issyk-Kul, where fish and other water creatures would be staring at them. And nobody would search for him or mourn him,

because there was no reason why a boy should be forever fooling mound in the water. So far, he hadn't drowned. If he did— who knows—maybe grandma really would not run to save him. If he was kin, at least, she said, but he was only a stranger. And a stranger, no matter how you feed him or look after him, remains a stranger. A stranger . . . But what if he didn't want to be a stranger? And why was he the stranger? Maybe it wasn't he, but she, who was the stranger?

But all this will come later in the story—this, and grandfather's dam. . . .

Well, then, he caught sight of the store truck as it came downhill, trailing a cloud of dust behind it. And he leaped with excitement, as if he knew he would get that schoolbag. He ran out of the water and quickly pulled his pants over his skinny thighs. Still wet and blue—the water in the river was cold—he hurried down the path to be the first to announce the coming of the truck.

The boy ran fast, jumping over low shrubs and going around boulders that were too big to jump across. He did not stop anywhere—not by the tall grasses, nor by the rocks, even though he knew that they were not plain grasses and rocks. They could take offense or even trip him up. "The store truck's coming, I'll be back," he cried as he ran past the "resting camel"—the reddish, humped granite boulder sunk chest-deep in the earth. At ordinary times the boy never passed by without patting the camel on the hump. He patted it with a light, familiar gesture, as grandpa patted his short- tailed gelding, as if to say, "Wait here, I must be off on business." Another of his boulders was a "saddle"—half-black, half-white, with a dip in the middle—and he could ride it like a horse. There was also a "wolf," brown-gray, hoary, with powerful shoulders and a heavy brow. The boy would stalk it on all fours and take aim at it. But his favorite was the "tank" —a huge, massive boulder right at the river's edge, the sand and gravel washed away around it. At any moment, the "tank" would plunge into the water, and the river would boil and churn and rise in fierce white-crested waves. That was what tanks did in the movies—down from the bank into the water, and on and on. The boy saw movies very seldom and therefore remembered everything. His grandfather sometimes took him to see a movie at the livestock-breeding farm in the neighboring village beyond the mountain. This was how a "tank" appeared by the water, ready to rush across the river. There were also other rocks, some "bad," some "kind," some even "sly," or "silly."

Among the plants there were also "favorites," "brave ones," "fearful," "evil ones," and a variety of others. The thornbush, for example, was the chief enemy. The boy fought it dozens of times every day, but there seemed no end to their war—the bush continued to grow and multiply. The wild

convolvulus, though also a mere weed, was the cleverest and merriest plant. Its flowers welcomed the sun in the morning better than any others. Other grasses did not know anything: morning, evening—it didn't matter to them. But the convolvulus—the moment it felt the warm rays of the sun it opened its eyes and laughed. First one eye, then another, then all the furled flowers opened up. White, pale blue, lilac, every color. . . . And if you sat quietly, quietly near them, it seemed that they were silently whispering among themselves about something. Even the ants knew this. In the morning they ran along the sterns and flowers, squinting in the sunshine and listening to what the flowers were saying. Perhaps they told each other about their dreams?

In the daytime, at noon, the boy liked to climb into the thickets of long-stemmed, reedlike shiraldzhins. The shiraldzhins were tall; they had no flowers, but they smelled good; and they grew in patches, gathering in dense groups, allowing other plants to come near them. The shiraldzhins were true friends, they offered the best hiding place, especially when you were hurt and wanted to cry where nobody could see. They smelled like the edge of a pinewood. It was hot and quiet among them, yet they did not shut out the sky. You could stretch out on your back and stare into the sky. At first, you could see nothing through the tears. But then the clouds would come up above and do whatever you wanted them to do. The clouds knew you were not happy, they knew you wanted to run away somewhere, to fly away where nobody would ever find you. And then everybody would sigh and moan: The boy is lost, where shall we find him now? And to prevent it, to keep you from disappearing, to make you lie still and watch them, the clouds would turn into anything you wished. The same clouds could turn into many things. All you needed was to see what they were showing.

And it was quiet among the shiraldzhins, and they did not shut out the sky. That's what they were like, the shiraldzhins, which smelled of hot pine.

There were many other things he knew about the grasses. Toward the silvery feather grass down in the meadow, he had a tolerantly condescending attitude. It was silly, that leather grass! Scatterbrained. Its soft, silky tassels could not live without wind. All they did was wait to see which way it blew, and then they bowed in the same direction. Not one or two, but all together, the whole meadow, as at a command. And if it rained or stormed, the feather grass went frantic, it did not know what to do, where to hide. It tossed and flattened, pressed itself against the earth. If it had feet, it surely would run away, just anywhere at all. But actually it was only pretending. The moment the storm was over, the giddy tassels were back at their game with the wind, bowing wherever it blew.

Alone, without playmates, the boy lived with the simple things around him, and only the store truck could make him forget everything and rush to meet it. After all, a store truck wasn't like stones and grasses. There wasn't a thing you could not find in it!

By the time the boy reached home, the store truck was already entering the yard behind the houses. The houses in the post faced the river. The front yard passed directly into the slope that ran down to the bank, and on the other side, across the river, the forest rose steeply from the washed-out ravine up the mountainside. The only way to drive up to the houses was from the back. If the boy had not made it in time, nobody would have known that the store truck was already there.

The men had all been gone since morning. The women were busy with their household chores. And the boy ran to each open door, crying shrilly:

"It's here! The store truck is here!"

The women hurried to get the little money they had tucked away, and ran out, each one racing to get there first. Even grandmother praised him:

"He's got a sharp eye, that boy!"

The boy felt proud, as if he had brought the store truck there himself. He was happy because he had been first with the news, because he rushed out with the women into the backyard, because he bustled with them at the open doors of the truck. But they forgot him immediately. They were too excited. All those goods—their eyes didn't know where to look first. There were only three women: his grandma; Aunt Bekey his mother's sister and the wife of the warden Orozkul, the most important man at the forest station; and the young Guldzhamal, the wife of his helper Seidakhmat, with her little girl in her arms. Only three women. But they fluttered about so much, tugging at the goods and turning everything upside down, that the salesman was obliged to ask them to wait their turn and stop chattering all at once.

His words, however, had small effect on the women. At first they grabbed everything. Then they began to make their elections. Then they returned what they had chosen. They put things aside, tried them on, debated among themselves, and asked the same questions over and over again. One thing they did not like, another was too expensive, a third was the wrong color . . . The boy stood at the side. He was bored now. The expectation of something extraordinary, the first joy he felt when he had caught sight of the truck on the mountainside, was gone now. The store truck had suddenly turned into an ordinary truck filled with a lot of rubbish.

The salesman frowned. It didn't look as if those women were going to buy anything. Why had he bothered driving through the mountains to this godforsaken spot?

And he was right. The women started to give up, their enthusiasm waned, they suddenly seemed tired. They began to look for excuses. Grandma complained about the lack of money. And without money, how could you buy anything? Aunt Bekey did not dare to make a big purchase without her husband. Aunt Bekey was the unhappiest woman on earth because she had no children, and Orozkul beat her for that whenever he got drunk. And this made grandfather suffer, too, for Aunt Bekey was grandfather's daughter. She bought a few trifles and two bottles of vodka. And that was too bad— she was making it worse for herself. Grandma could not keep from hissing, so that the salesman would not hear:

"Asking for trouble?"

"I know what I'm doing," snapped Aunt Bekey.

"Fool," grandma whispered, gloating. If it were not for the salesman, she would have given Aunt Bekey a piece of her mind. They were forever bickering, those two.

Young Guldzhamal came to the rescue. She began to explain that her Seidakhmat was going into town soon and he would need the money, so she could not spend much now.

And so they bustled around the store truck, bought "a kopek's worth" of goods, as the salesman said, and went back to their homes. What sort of trade was that? The salesman spat after the women and began to arrange his disordered wares, preparing to leave. Then he noticed the boy.

"What is it, roundhead?" he asked. The boy had protruding ears, a thin neck, and a large round head. "Want to buy something? Hurry up, or I'll close shop. D'you have any money?"

The salesman spoke at random, having nothing better to do, but the boy answered respectfully:

"No, uncle, I have no money," and he shook his head.

"I think you do," the salesman drawled, feigning disbelief. "You're all rich around here, you're only pretending you're poor. . . . And what's in your pocket, isn't that money?"

"No, uncle," the boy answered as sincerely and seriously as before, turning out his torn pocket. (The other pocket was sewn up.)

"So you've lost your money. Look for it where you've ken playing, you'll find it."

They were silent awhile.

"Whose boy are you?" the salesman asked. "Old Momun's?"

The boy nodded.

"His grandson, eh?"

"Yes," the boy nodded again.

“And where's your mother?"

The boy said nothing.

"She never writes, does she? I guess you don't know yourself?"

"I don't."

"And your father? You don't know either?"

The boy was silent.

"How is it, friend, you don't know anything?" the salesman chided. "Oh, well, in that case, here." He held out a handful of candy. "And good-bye to you."

The boy drew back shyly.

"Take it, take it. Don't hold me up. I've got to go."

The boy put the candy in his pocket. He wanted to run after the truck, to see it out to the road, and he called Baltek to go with him. Baltek was a terribly lazy, shaggy dog. Orozkul always threatened to shoot him—why keep such a dog, he said. But grandpa kept begging him to wait. They'd get a sheep dog first, then he would take Baltek away somewhere. Baltek did not care about anything. When he had eaten, he slept; when he was hungry, he was forever toadying up to someone—his own masters, strangers, it made no difference, so long as they would throw him something. That's what kind of dog he was, this Baltek. But sometimes, out of boredom, he would run after cars. True, never very far. He'd just get going, then suddenly turn back and amble home. An unreliable dog. Still, whatever he was like, it was a lot more fun to run with a dog than without one.

Quietly, so the salesman would not see, the boy threw Baltek one candy. "Look now," he warned the dog, "we'll run a long way." Baltek whimpered and wagged his tail, waiting for more. But the boy did not dare to

throw him another candy: the man might get offended; after all, he didn't give him a whole handful for the dog.

And then his grandfather appeared. The old man had been out to the beehives. From there he could not see the yard behind the houses. And now he just happened to come up in time, while the store truck was still there. Just by chance. Or else his grandson would not have gotten the schoolbag. The boy was lucky that day.

Old Momun, whom clever people had nicknamed Obliging Momun, was known to everyone in the district, and he knew everyone. He had earned his nickname by his invariable friendliness, his constant readiness to do things for people, to help everyone. And yet, his diligence was not appreciated, just as gold would not be appreciated if it were given away free. Nobody treated Momun with the respect due people of his age. He was treated without ceremony. At funeral feasts for eminent old men of the Bugu clan—Momun was a Bugan and very proud of it, and he never missed the funeral feasts for his clansmen—he would be asked to slaughter cattle, to meet honored guests and help them dismount, to serve tea, and even to chop wood and carry water. There are plenty of things to do at great funeral feasts, attended by many people from all parts of the country. Momun did everything he was asked quickly and easily; he never refused, like others. The young women of the village, who had to receive and feed the horde of guests, would say as they watched Momun at work:

"What would we have done without Obliging Momun?"

And so it would turn out that the old man, who had come all that distance with his grandson, was placed in a role lit for a young fellow, a mere helper. Anyone else would die of humiliation, but Momun never minded at all.

And nobody wondered at the sight of old Momun serving the other guests—that's what he had been all his life, Obliging Momun. It was his own fault. And if any stranger asked how it was that he was running errands for the women -were there no young fellows in the village?—Momun would say:

"The dead man was my brother." (He considered all Bugans his brothers. But weren't they equally "brothers" to the other guests?) "Who else is to work at his funeral feast if not I? Aren't we all bound by kinship, from the time of our ancestral Mother herself—the Horned Mother Deer? And she, the miraculous Mother Deer, had bidden us to be friends in life and in memory . . ."

That's what he was like, Obliging Momun!

Old and young addressed him with the familiar "thou." You could play jokes on him—he was never offended; you did not have to take him into account—he was a gentle, mild old man. No wonder it's said that people don't forgive those who do not know how to compel respect. And he didn't know how.

There were many things he did know. He knew carpentry and saddlemaking. He knew how to stack hay; when he was younger, he would build such haystacks that people would be sorry to break them up in winter: rain slid off the stacks as off the back of a goose, and snow lay on them like a sloping roof. During the war, as a member of the labor brigades, he worked as a bricklayer in Magnitogorsk, building factories; he was considered one of the best workmen. When he returned, he built wooden houses in the forest district and looked after the forest. Although listed as a helper, it was he who watched the forest, while Orozkul, his son-in-law, spent most of his time visiting his cronies. Except when the authorities came up—then Orozkul would be the master, showing them the forest, arranging hunting parties for them. Momun also tended the livestock and worked with the beehives. His whole life was spent in working and taking care of this and that from morning until night, and yet he never learned how to make people respect him.

But then, even Momun's appearance was not patriarchal, not like an *aksakal's* [note: elder; also, a respectful form of address to an older man]. No slow dignity, no sternness. He was the soul of kindness, and this unprofitable human quality was obvious at first glance. At all times, such people are taught: "Don't be kind, be hard! Take this now, and this! Be hard!" But, to his own misfortune, he remained incorrigibly kind. His face, crisscrossed with wrinkles, was always smiling, and his eyes forever asked: "What do you need? Is there anything you'd like me to do for you? I'll do it in a moment, just tell me what it is . . ."

His nose, shaped like a duck's bill, was soft, as though altogether without bone or gristle. And he was short of stature, a quick little old man, like an adolescent.

Even his beard was nothing but a joke. Two or three reddish hairs on his chin—that was all there was to it. He wasn't at all like some stately old man you might see riding down the road, with a beard like a sheaf of grain, in a great, loose overcoat with a wide lambskin collar and an expensive hat, astride a fine horse, its saddle trimmed with silver. A sage, a prophet, no one would hesitate to bow to such a man, he would be honored everywhere! But old Momun had been born only as the Obliging Momun. Perhaps his only advantage was that he never feared losing face with others. (Did I sit down right? Did I say the right thing, or give the wrong answer, or smile the wrong way, or this, or that?) In this respect, Momun, without suspecting it himself,

was extraordinarily fortunate. Many people waste away not so much from disease as from their uncontrollable, devouring passion to show themselves better and more important than they are. (Who doesn't want to be known as clever, worthy, handsome, and at the same time stern, just, and resolute?)

But old Momun was not like that. He was a funny, queer old man, and everybody treated him as just a funny, queer old man.

There was only one thing that could seriously offend Momun—failure to invite him to a family council regarding arrangements for a funeral feast. On such occasions he was deeply distressed and hurt, and not because he had been overlooked—he never decided anything at these councils anyway, he was merely present—but because an ancient obligation had been violated.

Momun had his own sorrows and afflictions, which made him suffer and often cry at night. But outsiders knew nothing about it. Only those closest to him knew.

When Momun saw his grandson near the truck, he sensed at once that the boy was upset over something. But since the salesman was a guest, the old man addressed him first. He quickly jumped down from the saddle and held out both hands to the salesman.

"Assalam aleikum, great merchant!" he said, half seriously, half in jest. "Has your caravan arrived safely, is your trade going well?" All of him beaming, Momun shook the salesman's hand. "How much water has gone by since we last met. Welcome to our parts!"

The salesman smiled tolerantly at his speech and his whole puny figure in the same coarse, worn boots, the same canvas trousers made by the old woman, the shabby jacket, the felt hat, grown rusty with sun and rain. And he answered:

"The caravan is safe. But what does it look like, when the merchant comes to you, and you run off into your fields and valleys? And tell your wives to hold on to their kopeks as to their souls at dying time? A man could show them the best goods in the world, and they won't open up their purses."

"Don't take offense, good man," Momun apologized in confusion. "If we had known you were coming, we wouldn't have left. As for money, what can you do if your pockets are empty? After we sell the potatoes in the fall . . .”

"Go on," the salesman interrupted him. "I know you're as rich as beys. You sit here in your mountains, with all the land, all the hay in the world. Look at those woods—a man can't get across them in three days. You keep livestock? You keep beehives? But when it comes to parting with a kopek, you

close your fists. Here, buy a silk quilt . . . Or a sewing machine, I've only one left . . ."

"Truly, we haven't got that kind of money," Momun apologized.

"Tell it to someone else. You're tight, old man, sitting on your money. And what for?"

"No, it's true, I swear by the Horned Mother Deer. . ."

“Here, take some corduroy, you can make yourself new pants."

"I would, I swear by the Horned Mother Deer . . ."

"Ah, what's the good of talking to you?" The salesman waved his hand. "Drove all this way for nothing. And where is Orozkul?"

"Gone since morning. To Aksai, I think. Some business with the shepherds . . ."

"Out visiting, eh?" the salesman said understandingly. There was an awkward pause.

"Don't take offense, dear man," Momun spoke again. "In the autumn, God willing, we'll sell the potatoes. . .”

"It's a long way to autumn."

"Well, no hard feelings. Come in, and have some tea."

"That isn't what I came for," the salesman refused.

He began to close the truck doors, then suddenly he glanced at the grandson who stood near the old man holding the dog by the ear, ready to run after the truck.

"Why not buy him a schoolbag? The kid must be ready for school, no? How old is he?"

Momun immediately seized on the idea. At least he'd buy something from the pestering salesman. Besides, the boy really needed a schoolbag; he'd be starting school next fall.

"You're right," said Momun. "I never thought of that. Certainly, he's seven, going on eight. . . . Come over here," he called to his grandson.

The old man searched through his pockets and found the five ruble note he had stashed away. It must have been lying in his pocket for a long time—all soiled and crumpled.

"Here, roundhead." The salesman winked slyly at the boy, handing him the schoolbag. "You'd better study, now. If you don't learn your ABCs, you'll be stuck for life with grandpa in the mountains."

"He'll learn! He's a smart one," Momun replied, counting the change. Then he glanced at his grandson who was awkwardly clutching the new schoolbag, and pressed him close to himself. "That's good, now. In the fall you'll go to school," he said in a low voice.

The hard, heavy palm of the grandfather gently covered the boy's head. And the boy's throat contracted. He felt sharply the thinness of the old man and the familiar smell of his clothes, a smell of dry hay and the sweat of a hardworking man. True, dependable, his own. Perhaps the only person in the world who doted on him—this simplehearted, funny old man whom idle tongues had nicknamed Obliging Momun. . . . Well, what of it? Whatever he was like, the boy was glad to have his own grandfather.

The boy had never expected to feel such happiness. He had never thought of school before. Until now, he had only seen other children who went to school—out there, in the Issyk-Kul villages beyond the mountains, where he had gone with his grandfather to the funeral feasts of important old Bugans.

From that moment on, the boy never parted from his schoolbag. Triumphant, he ran to show it off to everybody in the settlement. First he took it to grandma—look what grandpa bought me! Then to Aunt Bekey. She was glad to see it, and had some words of praise for the boy as well.

Aunt Bekey was seldom in a good mood. Most of the time, gloomy and irritable, she paid no attention to her nephew. She couldn't be bothered with him. She had her own troubles. Grandma always said that if she had children of her own, she'd be a different woman. And Orozkul, her husband, would be a different man. And then Grandfather Momun would also be a different man, not as he was now. Although Momun had two daughters—Aunt Bekey and her younger sister, the boy's mother—things were still bad. It was had to have no children of your own, but even worse when your children had no children. So grandma said. Try and understand her . . .

After Aunt Bekey, the boy ran over to show the new purchase to Guldzhamal and her daughter. And from there, he hurried to the meadow, to Seidakhmat. Again he dashed past the rusty "camel," and again he had no time to stop and pat his hump; then past the "saddle," the "wolf," the "tank," and on along the riverbank. Up the path through the shrubbery. And then along the mowed strip, until he came to Seidakhmat.

Seidakhmat was alone in the field. Grandpa had long finished mowing his section, and Orozkul's as well. And the hay had already been removed. Grandma and Aunt Bekey had raked it together, Momun had piled it on the wagon, and he boy had helped grandpa, dragging the hay closer to the wagon. They had piled two haystacks by the cowshed. Grandpa had built them so neatly that no rain could penetrate smooth, silky stacks, as though combed down with a fine comb. He did this every year. Orozkul never mowed, he made his father-in-law do everything. He was the chief, after all. If I want to, he would say, I can fire you in a minute. He'd say that to grandpa and to Seidakhmat. When he was drunk. Rut he couldn't really fire grandpa. Who'd do the work? How could he get along without grandpa? There was a lot of work in the woods, especially in the fall. Grandpa always said—the woods are not a flock of sheep, the trees won't wander off. But t hey need as much looking after. In case of fire, or a sudden flood from the mountains, a tree won't jump out of the way, won't leave its spot. It will perish where it stands. That's why you need a forester, to see that the tree doesn't perish. And as for Seidakhmat, Orozkul wouldn't fire him either, because Seidakhmat was a quiet man. He never interfered, he never argued. But though he was a quiet and strong fellow, he was lazy, and he liked to sleep. That was why he had chosen forest work. Grandpa said that on the Soviet farms such fellows drove trucks and plowed the land with tractors. And Seidakhmat let even his own potato patch get overgrown with weeds. Guldzhamal had to take care of the garden herself, with the baby in her arms.

And now Seidakhmat kept putting off the mowing too. Even grandpa had scolded him the other day. "Last winter," he said, "it wasn't you but the beasts I was sorry for. That's why I gave you of my own hay. If you're counting on the old man's hay again, you'd better tell me right now—I'll mow it for you." That really shamed him, and today Seidakhmat had been swinging away with his scythe since early morning.

Hearing quick footsteps behind him, Seidakhmat turned and wiped his face with his sleeve.

"What is it? Does anybody want me?"

"No. But I have a schoolbag. Here. Grandpa bought it. I'll go to school."

"Is that why you came running here?" Seidakhmat laughed. "Your grandpa's a bit that way, you know"—he twirled his finger at his temple —"and you're the same. Come on, now, let me see it." He clicked the lock, turned the schoolbag this way and that, and gave it back to the boy, mockingly shaking his head. "But wait a minute," he cried.

"What school will you go to? Where is it, that school of yours?''

"What do you mean, what school? The Fermen school."

"You mean you'll walk to Dzhelesai?" Seidakhmat asked with wonder. "Why, that's a good five miles across the mountain."

"Grandpa said he'll take me there, on horseback."

"Every day, both ways? The old man's daffy. It's time for him to go to school himself. He'll sit there with you at the desk until the classes are over, and then—back home!" Seidakhmat rolled with laughter. The idea of old Momun sitting with his grandson at the school desk was too funny for words.

The boy stood by, bewildered.

"Oh, I'm only joking," explained Seidakhmat.

He gave him a light fillip on the nose and pulled the visor of grandpa's cap over the boy's eyes. Momun never wore the uniform cap of the Forestry Department. He was too shy: "What am I, some sort of bigwig? I'll never exchange my Kirghiz hat for any other." In summertime, Momun wore an old white felt hat, of the kind that used to be called akkalpak in former times, its brim edged with faded black satin, and in the winter an equally ancient sheepskin hat. He let his grandson wear the green uniform cap of a forester.

The boy was offended at Seidakhmat for making fun of his news. He sullenly pushed the visor of his cap back over his forehead, and when Seidakhmat tried to give him another fillip on the nose, he jerked his head back and snapped at him:

"Leave me alone!"

"Oh, what a sorehead!" Seidakhmat smiled. "Don't mind me. The schoolbag is first-class." And he patted the boy on the shoulder. "And now, scram. I must still mow and mow . . ."

He spat on his hands and picked up the scythe.

The boy ran home along the same path, and again past his stones. This was no time to play with stones. A schoolbag was a serious thing.

The boy was fond of talking to himself. This time, however, he spoke not to himself but to the schoolbag: "Don't believe him, my grandpa isn't like that at all. It's only that he isn't sly, and that's why people make fun of him. Because he's not the least bit sly. He'll take us to school. But you don't even know where the school is. It's not so far, I'll show you. We'll look at it through the binoculars from Outlook Mountain. I'll show you my white ship, too. But first let's go into the barn—that's where I hide my binoculars. I really should be watching the calf, but I always run off to look at the white ship. Our calf's

big now, you can't hold him when he pulls. But he's gotten into the habit of suckling the cow. And the cow is his mother, she doesn't grudge him the milk. You understand? Mothers never grudge their children anything. That's what Guldzhamal says, she has her own little girl. . . . They'll milk the cow soon, and we'll take the calf out to pasture. Then we'll climb up Outlook Mountain and see the white ship. I talk like this with the binoculars too, sometimes. Now we'll be three—you, me, and the binoculars."

The boy spoke to his schoolbag as he was returning home. He enjoyed talking to it. He intended to continue the conversation, to tell it more about himself—things it didn't know yet. But he was interrupted. There was a clatter of hooves from the side. A rider on a gray horse emerged from behind the trees. It was Orozkul, who was also going home. The gray stallion, Alabash, whom no one else was allowed to ride, was saddled with the special holiday saddle, with copper stirrups and a leather strap across his chest, with tinkling silver rings.

Orozkul's hat had slipped to the back of his head, exposing a red, low forehead. The heat had made him sleepy, and lie dozed on his horse. His velvet coat, poorly tailored but made to resemble those worn by the district leaders, was unbuttoned from top to bottom. His white shirt had come out from under his belt. He was full of food and quite drunk. Just a short while ago he had been sitting with friends, drinking *koumyss* [note: fermented mare’s milk] and gorging himself on meat.

When shepherds and horseherds from the surrounding areas came to the mountain pastures for the summer, they often invited Orozkul to visit them. He had old friends among I hem, but they invited him for their own reasons too. Orozkul was a useful man. Especially to those who were building 'louses for themselves, but had to spend summers up in the mountains. They could not leave the herds alone and go to look for building materials. Besides, the materials weren't easy to come by, especially timber. But if you pleased Orozkul, he'd let you have a couple of trees from the forest preserve. Otherwise you might be wandering in the mountains with your herd to the end of your days, and the house would never he finished.

Dozing in the saddle, heavy and self-important, Orozkul rode with the toes of his fine cowhide boots resting carelessly in the stirrups. He nearly tumbled off the horse when the boy suddenly came running toward him, swinging his schoolbag.

"Uncle Orozkul, look what I have! Look at my school-bag! I'll go to school!"

"Oh, the devil take you," Orozkul swore, startled, and pulled at the reins. He glanced at the boy with sleepy, reddened, drunken eyes. "What's the matter, where'd you come from?"

"I'm going home. I have a schoolbag. I went to show it to Seidakhmat," the boy said in a small voice.

"All right, go on and play," Orozkul growled and, swaying uncertainly in the saddle, he went on. What did he care about that stupid schoolbag, about that brat abandoned by his parents, when he himself was so wronged by life, when God didn't see fit to grant him a son of his own, his own flesh and blood, while others were blessed with all the children they could want.

Orozkul sniffled and gave a sob. Pity and anger choked him. Pity for himself, regret that his life would pass without leaving a trace, and mounting anger at his barren wife. It was all because of her, damn her, going about empty bellied all these years.

"I'll show you!" Orozkul threatened her mentally, clenching his beefy fists, and moaned under his breath to keep himself from weeping out loud. He knew he would go home and beat her again. Every time he drank, this bull-like man went wild with grief and anger.

The boy walked after him along the path and was astonished to see his uncle vanish suddenly. Orozkul had turned off toward the river, dismounted, threw down the reins, and went on foot straight through the tall grass. He walked, swaying and stooped, pressing his hands over his face, his head pulled into his shoulders. At the bank, he squatted down, dipped his hands into the water and splashed it on his face.

"I guess he's got a headache from the heat," the boy decided when he saw what Orozkul was doing. He did not know that Orozkul was crying and could not stop. That he was crying because it was not his son who came running to meet him, and because he had not found within himself the tiling that was needed to say at least a human word or two to this boy with his schoolbag.

2

From the summit of Outlook Mountain you could see in all directions. Lying on his stomach, the boy adjusted the binoculars. These powerful field glasses had once been awarded to his grandfather for his long years of service at the forest post. The old man had no patience with them: "My own eyes are just as good." But they became the boy's favorite companion.

This time he had come to the mountain with the binoculars and the schoolbag.

At first, all objects jumped distortedly in the round lenses, then suddenly they became firm and sharp. This was the most interesting moment of all. Holding his breath so as not to disturb the focus, he admired the landscape opening before him as though he had created it himself. Then he would shift to another spot, and again everything became displaced, and the boy again turned the adjustment screw to capture the lost focus.

He could see everything from here. All the way out were the highest, snowcapped summits, above Ivhich there was nothing but the sky. They loomed beyond the other mountains, rising above their peaks and the whole earth. Then ca me the mountain ranges just beneath the snowy caps—forested, with dark pinewoods above and leafy trees below. Beneath these were the Kungey Mountains, facing the sun, on which nothing grew but grass. And on the opposite side, where the lake was, there were still lower ones, with barren, rocky slopes descending to the valley that bordered on the lake. On that side he could also see fields, meadows, orchards, villages. . . . The green fields were already touched with streaks of yellow: harvest time was near. Like mice, little cars and trucks were scuttling up and down the roads, followed by winding trails of dust. And at the very edge of the land, as far as the eye could see, beyond the sandy line of shore, was the dense blue curve of the lake. It was Issyk-Kul. There, the water met the sky, with nothing beyond them. The lake lay shining, deserted, and motionless, save for the faint stirring of white foam along the bank.

The boy looked that way for a long time.

"The white ship has not come yet," he said to the schoolbag. "Let's take another look at our school."

The neighboring valley, on the other side of Outlook Mountain, was clearly visible from here. Through the binoculars, the boy could even see the

thread in the hands of an old woman who sat spinning near the window, outside her house.

The Dzhelesai valley was treeless, except for a few remaining solitary old pines. Once there were woods there. Now there were rows of slate-roofed barns, and large dark piles of straw and manure. The pedigreed calves from the dairy farm were kept there. And a short distance from the barns there was a small double row of houses—the cattle breeders' village. The little street climbed down a sloping mound. At the very end of it stood a small building. It was the four-year primary school. The older children were sent to the boarding school at the Soviet farm; the younger ones attended this school.

The boy had visited the village with his grandfather to see the medic when he had a sore throat. Now he looked intently through his binoculars at the little school covered with a reddish tile roof, with a single, crooked chimney and a handmade plywood sign: МЕКТЕР. He did not know how to read, but he guessed that this was the word. Everything, even the slightest, unbelievably small details, could be seen through the field glass. Some words scraped out on the plaster wall, the broken, pasted glass in the window frame, the warped, rough boards of the porch. He imagined himself going there with his schoolbag and stepping into the door on which a large padlock was now hanging. What would he find behind that door?

When he finished examining the school, the boy turned his binoculars to the lake. But everything was still the same. The white ship had not yet appeared. The boy turned his back to the lake and looked down, putting his binoculars aside. Below, right at the foot of the mountain, the seething, silvery river rushed over rocks and rapids along the bottom of the valley. The winding road followed the riverbank and disappeared together with the river behind a turn in the gorge. The opposite bank was steep and wooded—the beginning of the forest sanctuary that climbed high into the mountains, to the very snowcaps. The pines climbed farther than the rest. They raised their dark little brushes along the crests of the mountain ranges, amidst the rocks and snow.

The boy looked mockingly at the houses, barns, and sheds in the yard of the forest station. They seemed small and fragile from above. Beyond the station he could distinguish his familiar rocks, the camel, the wolf, the saddle, the tank. He had first seen them from here, through his binoculars, and it was then that he had named them.

With a mischievous grin, the boy stood up and threw a stone in the direction of the yard. The stone fell some distance below, on the mountain. The boy sat down and began to study the settlement through his binoculars.

First through the larger lenses. The houses ran farther and farther away and turned into toy boxes. The boulders turned into pebbles. And the pond that grandfather had built for him in the river shallows seemed altogether funny—just big enough for a sparrow bath. The boy laughed and shook his head. He quickly turned the binoculars and adjusted the focus. His beloved boulders, enlarged to gigantic size, seemed to press their foreheads right into the lenses. The camel, the wolf, the saddle, and the tank were overwhelming—full of ridges, cracks, and spots of rusty lichen on their sides. And, most important of all, they really had a striking resemblance to what the boy had named them.

Beyond the boulders, on the shallow bank, was grandpa's pond. Through the binoculars, the spot was clearly visible. The water ran up briefly from the rapid stream upon the wide pebbled shoals, spread out, and rolled back, seething, into the rushing current. In the shallows, the water reached up to the knees, but the undertow was so strong that it could carry off a boy like him. To keep from being carried off, he would hold on to the willow growing by the riverside, some of its branches on the ground, others splashing in the water. But he could only dip in for a moment, and what kind of bathing was that? Like a horse tied to a stake. And then, all the scolding, all the anger at home. Grandma would nag his grandfather: "He'll be carried off into the river, then let him blame himself—I will not stir a finger. Who needs him, anyway? His own mother and father left him. And I have troubles enough without him, I've got no strength left."

What could one say to her? She was an old woman, and what she said was right. But then, Momun felt sorry for the boy, too. The river was almost at the door and no matter how much the old woman scolded and threatened, the boy still ran into the water. And so Momun decided to dam up the shallows with rocks, so the boy would have a pond to play in without danger.

Who knows how many rocks old Momun dragged to the shallows, choosing large ones that the current could not dislodge. He carried them pressed against his stomach, and, standing in the water, built them up cunningly, so that the water could flow in freely between them and flow out just as freely. Funny-looking, thin, with his sparse little beard, in wet trousers clinging to his body, he labored all day long over the dam. And in the evening he lay stretched out on his back, coughing, unable to bend or straighten out. And grandma lashed out at him:

"A young fool, well, he's young. But what can a body say about an old fool? What the devil did you have to knock yourself out for? You keep him, you feed him—what else do you want? Catering to every damn foolishness. Mark my word, no good will come of it. . .”

Anyway, the pond turned out very well. Now the boy could swim without fear. And always with open eyes. Because fish swim in the water with open eyes. He had a strange longing—to turn into a fish. And to swim far away.

As he was looking at the pond through his binoculars, the boy imagined himself there. He saw himself throwing off his shirt and pants and stepping in, shrinking a little because the water in mountain streams is always cold—it takes your breath away, then you get used to it. Now, holding on to a willow branch, he plunged into the current face down. The water closed with a splash over his head and flowed, fiery cold, under his belly, over his back and legs. Under the water all outside sounds vanish—you hear only the rushing of the stream. Keeping his eyes wide open, he stared hard to see everything that could be seen. His eyes prickled and hurt, but he smiled proudly to himself and even stuck his tongue out. That was for grandma. Let her know. He wouldn't drown. And he wasn't afraid of anything. He let go of the branch and the water swept him off until his feet were up against the stones of the dam. And then his breath gave out. He jumped out of the water, climbed into the bank and ran back to the willow. And down again and again, many times more. He was ready to swim in grandpa's pond a hundred times a day. Until he finally turned into a fish. And he had to, he had to become a fish.

The boy sighed. After examining the riverbank, he turned the binoculars to his yard. The hens, the turkeys with their chicks, the ax leaning against a stump, the steaming samovar, and all the other objects in the yard became so incredibly huge, they came so close that the boy involuntarily stretched out his hand to touch them. Then, to his horror, he saw the red calf, enlarged to elephant size, placidly chewing at the wash hung on the line. The calf closed his eyes with pleasure, saliva trickled down his lips—he was so happy chewing a whole mouthful of grandma's dress.

"Oh, you stupid!" The boy jumped up with his binoculars and waved his hand. "Get away, do you hear, get away! Baltek! Baltek!" The dog lay calmly by the house. "Get him! Get him!" the boy cried desperately to the dog. But Baltek didn't even prick up his ears. He lay stretched out in the shadow without a care in the world.

At that moment grandma came out of the house. She clapped her hands, seized a broom, and rushed at the calf. The calf ran, grandma followed. His eyes glued to the binoculars, the boy squatted down to keep from being seen on the mountain. Having driven off the calf, the old woman walked back toward the house, swearing, breathless with anger and with running. The boy saw her as clearly as if he were right next to her. She was as close in his glass as in the movies, when they show only a person's face. He

saw her yellow eyes, narrowed with rage. He saw the flush that covered her whole wrinkled face. As in the movies, when the sound suddenly breaks off, grandma's lips moved rapidly and soundlessly, baring her jagged teeth with gaps between them. It was impossible to hear her words at this distance, but the boy heard them as clearly and distinctly as if she were shouting them right over his ear. How she swore at him! He knew it by heart: "Just wait. Wait till you come back. I'll show you! And I won't give a damn for grandpa. How many times I've told him to throw out that stupid looking-gadget. Again he's run off to the mountain. A plague on that devil's ship, may it burn up, may it drown . . ."

The boy on the mountain sighed heavily. Wouldn't it happen just today that he would let the calf out of his sight? Just on the day when he had got his schoolbag, when he was already dreaming of how he'd go to school?

The old woman went on and on. Continuing her scolding, she examined her chewed-up dress. Guldzhamal came out with her daughter to see what was amiss. Complaining to her, grandma got even more upset. She shook her fists in the direction of the mountain. Her bony, dark fist waved threateningly in front of the binoculars. "Found himself a game. A plague on that damned ship. May it go up in flames, may it go down to the bottom . . ."

The samovar was boiling in the yard. He could see through the binoculars the puffs of steam breaking out from under the lid. Aunt Bekey came out for the samovar. And the whole thing started all over. Grandma stuck her chewed-up dress under Bekey's nose. "Here, look at your nephew's doing!"

Aunt Bekey began to quiet her down, to defend him. The boy guessed what she was saying—probably the same things she had said before: "Calm down, mother. He's still young, he doesn't know. What can you ask of him? He's alone here, without friends. Why shout, why frighten the child?" To which grandma undoubtedly answered: "Don't you teach me. Try and bear some children yourself, then you'll know what you can ask of children. What's he hanging out on that mountain for? He's got no time to tie up the calf? What's he looking for? His no-good parents? The two who brought him into the world and then ran off in different directions? It's easy for you, a barren one . . ."

Even at this distance, the boy saw in his binoculars how Aunt Bekey's gaunt cheeks turned deathly gray, how all of her began to shake. He knew exactly what Aunt Bekey would shout back—she'd throw the words into her stepmother's face: "And what about you, old witch, how many sons and daughters did you bring up? What are you, I'd like to know!"

And then all bell broke loose. Grandma howled with anger. Guldzhamal tried to make peace between the women, she talked to the old woman, put

her arm about her, trying to take her home, but grandma ranted on and on, rushing about the yard like a madwoman. Aunt Bekey snatched up the samovar, spilling the boiling water, and almost ran with it into her house. And grandma wearily sank onto a log and sobbed, complaining of her bitter fate. The boy was now forgotten. Now she raved against the Lord God himself and the whole world. "Is it me you're talking about? Is it me you're asking what I am?" grandma cried indignantly to her absent stepdaughter. "Why, if the Lord hadn't punished me, if He hadn't taken my five babies, if my only remaining son hadn't been struck down by a bullet in the war at the age of eighteen, if my old man, my darling Taygara, had not frozen to death during a snowstorm with his flock of sheep, would I ever be here among you forest people? Am I, then, like you, a barren one? Would I be living in my old age with your father, the half-witted Momun? For what sins, for what transgressions have you punished me, you damned, accursed God?"

The boy took the binoculars away from his eyes and his head drooped sadly. "How can we go home now?" he said quietly to the schoolbag. "It's all because of me, and because of that stupid calf. And because of you, too." He turned to the binoculars. "You're always calling me to look at the white ship. It's your fault, too."

He looked around him at the mountains, cliffs, rocks, and forests. Glistening streams fell silently from the glaciers in the heights. It was only here, below, that the water seemed at last to acquire a voice, to rush with constant, unceasing noise down the river. And the mountains were enormous and endless. The boy felt at that moment very small, and very lonely. Alone among the huge mountains rising on all sides.

The sun was already sinking toward sunset beyond the lake. It was growing cooler. The first, short shadows appeared on the eastern slopes. Now the sun would sink lower and lower, and the shadows would creep downward, to the foothills. The white ship usually appeared on Issyk-Kul Lake at this time of day.

The boy turned the binoculars to the farthest visible spot and held his breath. There it was! And everything was instantly forgotten. There, on the blue, blue edge of Issyk-Kul was the white ship. It had come. There it was! Long, powerful, splendid, with its row of tall smokestacks. It sailed in a straight line, steady and even. The boy quickly polished the lenses with the edge of his shirt and adjusted the focus again. The outlines of the ship became even sharper. Now he could see it rocking slightly on the waves, leaving a white, foaming wake behind it. His eyes glued to the glass, the boy stared with excited admiration at the white ship. If he could have his way, he would ask the ship to come nearer, to let him see the people on it. But the

white ship didn't know his wish. It went slowly and majestically on its own way, who knows whence and who knows where.

For a long time the boy could see the passage of the ship, and thought again how he would turn into a fish and swim down the river, all the way to the white ship.

When he had first caught sight of the white ship from Outlook Mountain, his heart began to hammer wildly with all that beauty, and he instantly decided that his father—an Issyk-Kul sailor—sailed on that very ship. And he believed it because he was so anxious for it to be true.

He did not remember either his father or his mother. He never saw them. Neither had ever come to visit him. But the boy knew that his father was a sailor on Issyk-Kul, and his mother left her son with grandpa after the marriage broke up, and went to the city. She went, and disappeared—in a distant city beyond the mountains, the lake, and more mountains.

Old Momun had once gone to that city to sell potatoes. He was away a whole week and, on returning, he told Aunt Bekey and grandma over a cup of tea that he had seen his daughter, the boy's mother. She was working in some big factory as a weaver, and she had a new family—two girls whom she sent to nursery school and saw only once a week. She lived in a big house, but in a tiny room, so tiny you could not turn around. And in the yard nobody knew anybody else, as in a marketplace. And everybody out there lived like that: they would come into their room and lock the door at once. Sitting locked up as in a prison all the time. Her husband, she said, was a bus driver, ferrying people through the streets from four in the morning till late at night. A difficult job. His daughter, he said, kept crying and begging his forgiveness. They were on a waiting list for a new apartment, but nobody knew when they would get it. When they did, she'd take the boy to live with them, if her husband permitted. And she asked the old man to wait awhile. Grandpa Momun told her not to worry. The main thing was to live in peace and harmony with her husband, and the rest would take care of itself. As for the boy, she shouldn't cry. "As long as I'm alive, I won't let anybody take him. And if I die, God-will find a way for him—a living man will always find what's destined for him." Aunt Bekey and grandma listened to the old man, sighing, and even shedding a tear or two.

It was also then, over their tea, that they mentioned his father. Grandpa had heard that his former son-in-law was still working as a sailor on some ship and that he, too, had a new family, with two or maybe three children. They lived near the harbor. People said he had quit drinking. And his new wife came with the children to the pier each time to meet him. "That means," the boy thought, "they come to meet this ship . .

And meantime the ship sailed on, departing slowly. White and long, it slid over the smooth blue of the lake, puffing smoke from its smokestacks and never suspecting that the boy, who had turned into a boy-fish, was swimming toward it.

He dreamed of becoming a fish, so that everything about him would be fishlike—body, tail, fins, and scales—everything except his head, which would remain his own: large, round, with lop ears and a scratched nose. And his eyes would be the same as now. Naturally, not quite the same, for they would have to look like fish eyes.

The boy's lashes were long, like the calf's, and they kept blinking of their own will. Guldzhamal said she hoped her daughter would have such lashes, she'd grow up to be a beauty! But why does one have to be a beauty? Or handsome? Who needs it! For his part, he had no use for beautiful eyes; he needed eyes that could see under the water.

The transformation was to take place in grandpa's pond. One, two, and he was a fish. Then he would leap at once from the pond into the river, straight into the seething current, and swim downstream. And go on and on, leaping out from time to time to look around. It would not be interesting to swim underwater all the time. He would speed along the rushing torrent past the red clay precipice, across the rapids, through the foaming waves, past woods and mountains. He would say good-bye to his favorite boulders: "Good-bye, resting camel," "good-bye, wolf," "good-bye, saddle," "good-bye, tank." And when he swam past the forest station, he would jump out of the water and wave his fins to grandpa: "Good-bye, eta, I'll be back soon." And grandpa would be petrified with wonder at such a sight and wouldn't know what to do. And grandma, and Aunt Bekey, and Guldzhamal with her daughter would all stand gaping with open mouths. Who has ever seen a creature with a human head and the body of a fish! And he'd be waving his fin to them: "Good-bye, I'm off to Issyk-Kul, to the white ship. My father is a sailor on it." Baltek would run to follow him along the bank. But if he decided to plunge into the water to join him, he'd cry: "No, Baltek, don't, you'll drown!" And he would continue on; he'd dive under the cables of the suspension bridge, and past the coastal shrubs, and down through the roaring gorge straight into Issyk-Kul.

Issyk-Kul is as big as a sea. He would swim across the waves, from wave to wave to wave—and then the white ship would appear before him. "Hello, white ship," he'd say to it, "it's I! I'm the one who always watched you through my binoculars." The people on the ship would come running and stare in wonder. And then he'd say to his father, the sailor: "Hello, papa, I am your son. I've come to you." "What kind of a son are you—half-man, half-fish?" "Just take me up on board, and I'll become your ordinary son." "Isn't

that something! Well, let me try." And his father would cast a net and catch him, and pull him up on deck. And he would turn back into himself. And then, and then . . .

Then the white ship would sail on. The boy would tell his father all he knew, all about his life. About the mountains where he lived, about his stones, about the river and the forest preserve, about grandpa's pond where he had learned to swim like a fish, with open eyes . . .

He'd tell him what it was like, living with Grandpa Momun. His father mustn't think that, just because a man is nicknamed Obliging Momun, it means that he's a bad man. There is no other grandpa like him anywhere, he is the best grandpa in the world. But he isn't sly, and that's why everybody laughs at him. Because he isn't sly at all. And Uncle Orozkul shouts at him, at the old man! Sometimes before strangers, too. And grandpa, instead of standing up for himself, forgives him, and even does his work in the woods and around the house. But that's not all! When Uncle Orozkul comes home drunk, instead of spitting into his shameless eyes, grandpa runs up to him, helps him down from the horse, takes him home, and puts him to bed. He even covers him with the coat so he won't get chilled or get a headache, and then he unsaddles the horse and cleans and feeds him. And all because Aunt Bekey is childless. Why is it like this, papa? Wouldn't it be better if people had children if they wanted to, and didn't if they didn't want to? It's a pity to watch grandpa when Uncle Orozkul starts beating Aunt Bekey. It might be easier if he hit grandpa instead. He cannot bear to hear her screams. But what can he do? If he wants to rush out to help his daughter, grandma doesn't let him: "Keep out of it," she says. "They'll settle it themselves. Why should you butt in? She's not your wife. Sit still." "But she's my daughter!" And grandma: "And what if you were living somewhere far away instead of next door? You'd gallop here on horseback every time to separate them? And who'd keep your daughter as a wife after that?"

The grandma I'm talking about isn't the one that used to be. You probably don't even know her, papa. This is another grandma. My own grandma died when I was little, then this one came. We often have queer weather—you can't make it out: one moment it's bright, then it gets cloudy, one moment it rains, the next it hails. This grandma is just like that, you never understand her. Now she's good, now angry, and now nothing at all. When she is sore, she'll nag you to death. Grandpa and I keep silent. She's always saying that a stranger, no matter how much you feed him and care for him, will bring you no good. But I'm not a stranger here, papa. I've always lived with grandpa. She's the stranger, she came afterward. And then began to call me a stranger.

You know, papa, in wintertime the snow gets so high, it's up to m3r neck. If you want to go into the woods, you can get there only on the gray horse, Alabash. He pushes through the snowdrifts with his chest. And the winds! You can't stay on your feet. When the waves rise on the lake, when your ship begins to roll from side to side, it is our San-Tash wind that rocks the lake. Grandpa told me that a long, long time ago enemy armies were coming to take this land. Then such a wind blew from our San-Tash Mountains that the warriors could not stay in the saddle. They climbed down from their horses, but they could not walk, either. The wind slashed at their faces till they bled. And when they turned from the wind, it drove and drove them from the back so that they could not even glance around, until it drove them all from Issyk-Kul. That's what happened. But we live in this wind. It starts from our place. All winter long the forest across the river creaks and hums and moans in the wind. Sometimes I'm frightened to hear it.

In wintertime there isn't much work in the woods. There are no people around at all—it isn't like the summer, when the herds come. I love it when people stop for the night in the big meadow in summertime, with their flocks of sheep or droves of horses. In the morning they go on into the mountains, but it's good when they come all the same. Their children and women come in trucks. The yurts and things are also carried by truck. When they settle down a bit, grandpa and I go out to greet them. He shakes every man's hand. I do too. Grandpa says younger people must always offer their hand to older ones. If you don't offer your hand, it means you have no respect for them. Grandpa also says that out of every seven men one might be a prophet. A prophet is a very good and clever man. And he who shakes his hand will be lucky all his life. But I say—if that is so, then why doesn't this prophet say that he's a prophet, and then everybody would shake his hand. Grandpa laughs: that's just the point, he says —the prophet doesn't know himself that he's a prophet; he is a simple man. Only a robber knows that he is a robber. I don't really understand this, but I always shake people's hands, although sometimes I feel very shy.

But when grandpa and I go to the meadow, I don't feel shy.

"Welcome to the summer pastures of our fathers and grandfathers! Is all well with the cattle and the folk? Are the children well?" That's what grandpa says. I only shake hands. Everybody knows grandpa, and he knows everybody. He has his own conversations with the visitors. He asks them questions, and he tells them about our lives. And I don't know what to talk about with the children. But then we start playing hide and seek, or war, and I get so excited I don't want to leave. If only it were summer all the time, then I could always play with the children in the meadow!

While we are playing, the men light fires. Do you think, papa, that the fires light up the whole meadow? They don't. The light is only near the fire, but outside the circle it gets darker than before. And we play war, we hide and attack in the dark, and it's like being in a movie. If you are the commander, everybody obeys you. It's probably nice for a commander to be a commander.

Then the moon comes up over the mountains. It's even more fun to play in the moonlight, but grandpa takes me home. We walk across the meadow, through shrubbery. The sheep lie quietly. The horses are grazing all around. We walk and hear someone start a song—a young shepherd, or maybe an old one. Grandpa stops me: "Listen. You won't often hear such songs." We stand, listening. Grandpa sighs and nods to the song.

Grandpa says that in olden times a khan was captured in battle by another khan. And this other khan said to his captive: "If you wish, you can live with me as my slave. If not, I will fulfill your most cherished desire, and then I'll kill you." The other thought a moment, and said: "I will not live as a slave. Better kill me. But first call here a shepherd from my land, the first you meet." "What do you want him for?" "I want to hear him sing before I die." Grandpa says people would give their lives for a song of their homeland. I'd like to see such people. Do they live in big cities?

But the songs are good to hear. Grandpa says they are ancient songs. "What people they were!" he whispers. "God, what songs they sang . . ." I don't know why, but I get to feel so sorry for grandpa, I love him so much that I want to cry.

In the morning there is already no one in the meadow. The sheep and horses are driven farther up into the mountains for the whole summer. Other herds come after them, from other collective farms. In the daytime they don't stop, they just pass through. But in the evening they stop for the night in the meadow. And then grandpa and I go out to greet them. He likes greeting people, and I learned it from him. Maybe one day I will shake a real prophet's hand in the meadow.

And in the winter Uncle Orozkul and Aunt Bekey go to the city, to the doctor. Some people say the doctor can help, he can give medicines to help a child get born. But grandma always says the best thing is to go to a holy place, way out across the mountains, where cotton grows in the fields. The land is flat there, so flat you'd think there couldn't be any mountains, but there is one—a holy one—Suleiman's Mountain. And if you slaughter a black sheep at its foot and pray to God, then climb the mountain and bow at every step and pray and beg God properly, he may take pity and give you a child. Aunt Bekey wants to go there, to Suleiman's Mountain, but Uncle Orozkul is

against it. It's too far. It's too expensive, he says. You can get there only by plane. And then, it is a long way till you get to the plane, and it costs lots of money too . . .

When they go to the city, we remain at the post just by ourselves. We and our neighbors, Uncle Seidakhmat, his wife Guldzhamal, and their little daughter. That's all.

In the evening, when all the chores are done, grandpa tells me tales. The night behind our house is black, black and bitter cold. The wind is raging. Even the highest mountains are frightened on such nights. They huddle closer to our house, to the light in our windows. And somehow, this makes me both afraid and glad. If I were a giant, I'd put on a giant overcoat and come out of the house. I'd tell the mountains loudly: "Don't be frightened, mountains! I am here. The wind, the darkness, the blizzard don't matter. I am not afraid of anything, don't you be afraid either. Stay where you are, don't huddle close together." Then I would walk over the snowdrifts, step across the river, and go into the woods. The trees are also frightened in the woods at night. They're alone, with nobody to say a word to them. They stand there naked, freezing in the cold, with no place to hide. And I would walk in the woods, and pat every tree on the trunk, so it wouldn't be afraid. I think, the trees that don't turn green in spring are those that froze from fright. We chop them down afterward for firewood.

I think about all this while grandpa tells me his tales. He talks for a long time. There are all sorts of tales. Some are funny, especially the one about the boy as big as a thumb who was called Chypalak and who was swallowed by a greedy wolf to his own misfortune. No, he was first eaten by a camel. Chypalak fell asleep under a leaf, and the camel was walking by and swallowed him with the leaf. That's why people say that a camel never knows what it eats. Chypalakbegan to cry and call for help. And so his old parents had to kill the camel to save their Chypalak. And the story with the wolf is even more interesting. He also swallowed Chypalak, because he was stupid. And then he cried bitter tears. The wolf met Chypalak and laughed: "What kind of tiny midge is that under my feet? I'll give one lick, and you'll be gone." But Chypalak said to him: "Don't touch me, wolf, or I'll turn you into a dog." And the wolf laughed again, "Ha, ha, who ever saw a wolf turn into a dog? Now I will eat you just because you are so rude." And he swallowed Chypalak. He swallowed him and forgot all about it. But from that day on he couldn't live a wolf's life anymore. As soon as the wolf would creep up to the sheep, Chypalak would shout in his belly: "Hey, shepherds, wake up! It's I, the gray wolf, creeping up to steal a sheep!" The wolf didn't know what to do. He bit his sides, he rolled on the ground. But Chypalak wouldn't stop. "Hey, shepherds, come quick, give me a good thrashing!" The shepherds would run after the wolf with cudgels, the wolf would run away. And the shepherds

followed, wondering: the wolf must have gone crazy—he runs away, and yells, "Catch up with me, brothers, thrash me, don't spare my hide!" The shepherds rolled with laughter, and the wolf would get away. But it didn't do him any good. Wherever he turned, Chypalak would get in his way. Everywhere people chased him and laughed at him. The wolf grew thin with hunger, nothing but skin and bones. He'd click his teeth and whine: "What is this trouble that has fallen on my poor head? Why do I keep calling misfortune on myself? Have I gone daffy with old age and lost my wits?" And Chypalak whispers in his ear: "Run to Tashmat, he has fat sheep! Run to Baimat, his dogs are deaf. Run to Ermat, his shepherds are asleep." And the wolf sits and whimpers: "I won't run anywhere, I'll go and hire myself out somewhere as a dog . . ."

Isn't that a funny story, papa? Grandpa has other stories, too, some sad, some frightening. But my favorite one is about the Horned Mother Deer. Grandpa says that everyone who lives near Issyk-Kul should know it. Not to know it is a sin. Do you know it, papa? Grandpa says it is true, that it really happened a long time ago. He says we are all children of the Horned Mother Deer. You and me and everybody else.

So that's how we live in wintertime. And the winter lasts and lasts. If it weren't for grandpa's tales, I'd get terribly bored.

But spring is fine. When it gets really warm, the shepherds come into the mountains again. And then we're not alone. Only across the river there is nobody else, we are the last. Across the river there is only the forest, and everything that lives in it. That's why we live at the post, to make sure that no one sets a foot inside the forest, that no one breaks a single branch. One day learned people came to visit us. Two women, both wearing pants, a little old man, and a young fellow. The young one was a student. They spent a whole month with us. Collecting leaves and branches. They said there were few forests left in the world like our San-Tash, almost none at all. And every tree should be guarded and watched over.

And I used to think that grandpa just felt sorry for every tree. He gets very upset when Uncle Orozkul lets his friends cut down pines for logs.

3

The white ship was receding. It was no longer possible to make out its smokestacks even through the binoculars. Soon it would disappear from sight. The boy now had to invent the end of his journey on his father's ship. But he could not find the right ending. He could easily imagine himself turning into a fish, swimming down the river to the lake, meeting the white ship and his father. And everything he'd tell his father. But what came after that? He could not work it out. Suppose the shore was already in sight. The ship moved toward the harbor. The sailors prepared to disembark. His father also had to go home. His wife and two children were waiting for him at the dock. But what was he to do? Go with his father? Would he take him along? And if he did, and his wife asked: "Who is this? Where's he from? What do we need him for?" No, it was best not to go . . .

And the white ship moved farther and farther, turning into a scarcely visible dot. The sun was already at the edge of the water. He could see through the binoculars the dazzling, fiery purple surface of the lake.

The ship was gone. It vanished. And the tale of the white ship was over. It was time to go home.

The boy picked up the schoolbag from the ground, pressed the binoculars under his arm, and quickly ran down the mountain, slithering down the slope like a little snake. And the nearer he came to his home, the uneasier his spirit. He would have to answer for the dress that had been chewed up by the calf. Now he could think of nothing but the coming punishment. To keep up his courage, he said to the schoolbag: "Don't be frightened. So they'll give us a scolding. I didn't do it on purpose. I simply didn't know the calf ran off. So they'll cuff me on the ears. I can stand it. And you, if they throw you down on the floor, don't worry. You won't break, you're a schoolbag. Now, if grandma gets her hands on the binoculars, that's a different story. We'll hide them in the barn first, then we'll go home . . ."

And this was what he did. Yet it was frightening to enter the house.

A warning silence came from within. And the yard was as quiet and empty as if all the people had gone away. It turned out that Aunt Bekey had gotten another beating from her husband. And Grandpa Momun had tried again to curb his crazed, drunk son-in-law. Again the old man had to beg and plead, to hang on Orozkul's huge paws, and witness all that shame—the sight

of his bruised, disheveled, screaming daughter. And hear his daughter abused in the vilest language in the presence of her own father. Hear her called a barren bitch, a thrice-damned she-ass, and many other words. And listen to his daughter wailing over her fate in the wild voice of a madwoman: "Is it my fault that heaven deprived me of conception? How many women in the world keep bearing young like sheep, and I'm accursed by God. What for? Why must I suffer such a life? It will be better if you kill me, you beast! There—hit me, hit me! . . ."

Old Momun sat brokenly in the corner, still breathing hard. His eyes were closed, and his hands, folded on his knees, were trembling. He was very pale.

Momun glanced at his grandson without saying anything, and his eyes closed wearily again. Grandma was not home. She had gone to make peace between Aunt Bekey and her husband, to clean up the house, pick up the broken dishes. That's what she was like, grandma: when Orozkul was beating his wife, she didn't interfere and kept grandpa back. But after the fight she'd go and try to talk some sense into them, quiet them down. Well, that was something too.

More than anyone else, the boy pitied the old man. On such days he seemed close to death. Benumbed, Momun sat in the corner, never showing his face to anyone. He never told anybody, not a soul, what he was thinking. And he was thinking at these moments that he was old, that he had had a single son, and even he had died in the war. And no one knew him any longer, no one remembered him. If his son had lived, who knows, life might have turned out differently. Momun was also mourning for his dead wife, with whom he had spent a lifetime. But the worst thing of all was that his daughters had found no happiness. The younger, leaving his grandson with him, was now struggling out there with a big family in one room. The older was suffering here with Orozkul. And though he, her old father, was nearby and willing to endure any hardship for her sate, what good was that? The blessing of motherhood was kept and kept from her. It was many years now that she had been with Orozkul, and she was sick to death of living with him, but where was she to go? And what would happen later? Who knows, he might die any day, he was an old man. What would she do then, his unfortunate daughter?

The boy hastily drank some milk from a cup, ate a piece of pancake, and huddled quietly by the window. He did not light the lamp, afraid to disturb his grandfather. Let him sit and think.

The boy was also thinking his own thoughts. He could not understand why Aunt Bekey tried to appease her husband with vodka. He'd hit her with

his fist, and she would run and bring him some more. That Aunt Bekey! How many times her husband beat her within an inch of her life, and she forgave him everything. And Grandfather Momun forgave him. Why should they forgive? Such people should not be forgiven. He was a rotten man, a bad man. Who needed him here? They'd be much better off without him.

The boy's embittered imagination conjured up a picture of just punishment for his uncle. All together, they jumped on Orozkul and dragged him, fat, huge, dirty, to the river. There they swung him and threw him into the wildest, most turbulent rapids. And he pleaded for Aunt Bekey's forgiveness, and Grandfather Momun's. For he, of course, could not become a fish.

These thoughts relieved the boy. He even wanted to laugh when he imagined Uncle Orozkul thrashing about in the river, his velvet hat floating next to him.

But, unfortunately, the grown-ups did not do the things the boy thought would be just. They did everything the other way around. Orozkul would come home tipsy, and they would welcome him as if nothing were wrong. Grandpa would take his horse, his wife would run to make the samovar. As though everybody had been doing nothing but waiting for his coming. And he'd begin to carry on. At first he would lament and cry. How was it, he'd complain, that every man, even the lowest good-for-nothing whose hand you need not shake, had children, as many as his heart desired? Five, even ten. In what way was he, Orozkul, worse than others? What was wrong with him? Didn't he have a good job? Thank God, he was chief overseer of the forest preserve. Was he some homeless tramp? But even Gypsies had their brats, swarms of them. Or was he a nobody, without respect from anyone? He had everything. He was a success in every way. He had a fine saddle horse, and a handsome whip in his hands, and he was welcomed and honored wherever he went. Then why were other men of his age already celebrating their children's weddings, while he . . . What was he without a son, without his own seed?

Aunt &key also wept, bustled about, tried to please her husband. She brought out the bottle she had tucked away and took a drink herself to drown her troubles. And so it went, till Orozkul would suddenly go wild and take out all his anger on her, on his own wife. And she forgave him everything. And grandfather forgave him. Nobody tied him up. He'd sober up by morning, and his wife, all black and blue, would have tea ready for him. Grandpa would already have his horse out, fed and saddled. Orozkul would drink his tea, mount his horse, and once again he was the chief, the master of all the San-Tash forests. And it never occurred to anyone that a man like that should have been thrown into the river a long time ago. . . .

It was dark. Night had fallen.

And so the day ended, the day when the boy was given his first schoolbag.

As he was going to bed, he could not think of a place for his schoolbag. Finally, he put it next to his head. The boy did not know, he would learn later, that half the class would have exactly the same schoolbags. But that would not upset him anyway. His own would remain a very special one. Nor did he know that new events awaited him in his small life, that a day would come when he'd be left alone in the whole world, with nothing but his schoolbag. And that the reason for it all would be his favorite tale about the Horned Mother Deer.

That evening he had a strong desire to hear it again. Old Momun was also fond of it and told it as though he had witnessed everything himself, sighing, weeping, falling silent now and then, and listening to his own thoughts.

But the boy did not venture to disturb his grandfather. He understood that old Momun's mind was not on tales that evening. "We'll ask him another time," the boy whispered to his schoolbag. "Tonight I shall tell you about the Horned Mother Deer, word for word, just like grandpa. And I shall speak so low that nobody will hear. And you will listen. I like to tell stories and see everything before me, as in the movies. Well, now. Grandpa says that all of this is true. It really happened. . .

4

It happened long ago. In ancient, ancient times, when there were more forests on earth than grass, and more water in our country than dry land, a Kirghiz tribe lived by the banks of a wide, cold river. The river's name was Enesai. It flows far from here, in Siberia. To go there on horseback, you must ride three years and three months. Today this river is called Yenisei, but then its name was Enesai. And that is why there is a song that goes like this:

Is there a river wider than you, Enesai,

Is there a land more beloved than you, Enesai,

Is there a sorrow deeper than you, Enesai,

Is there a freedom freer than you, Enesai?

There is no river wider than you, Enesai,

There is no land more beloved than you, Enesai,

There is no sorrow deeper than you, Enesai,

There is no freedom freer than you, Enesai.

Many peoples lived along the Enesai in those days. Their lives were hard because they were always at war with each other. Many enemies surrounded the Kirghiz tribe. It was attacked by one enemy, then by another. Often the Kirghiz themselves made raids on others, took away their cattle, burned their dwellings, killed the people. They killed everyone they could—such was the time. Man had no pity on man. Man destroyed man. It became so bad that there was no one left to sow grain, breed cattle, go out hunting. It became easier to live by looting: you went out, you killed, you plundered. But blood had to be paid for by more blood; revenge by more revenge. And so blood flowed in rivers. Men lost all reason. There was nobody to make peace among enemies. The greatest glory went to those who knew how to catch the enemy unaware, destroy the alien tribe to the last soul, and seize its cattle and its wealth.

A strange, sad bird appeared in the taiga. It sang and wept all night in a grieving, human voice. It cried, flying from branch to branch: "Great trouble

is coming! Great trouble is coming!" And it came to pass. The dreadful day arrived.

That clay the Kirghiz tribe on Enesai was burying its old chief. The great hero Kulche had led the tribe in peace and war for many years. He had led his warriors in numerous campaigns and fought in many battles. He had survived the battles, but at last his dying hour had come. His tribesmen sorrowed greatly for two days, and on the third day they prepared to lay the hero's body in the earth. According to ancient custom, a chief's body had to be carried on its final journey along the bank of the Enesai, over its cliffs and crags, so that the soul might bid farewell to the mother river from the heights. For "ene" means "mother," and “sai" means "river." And now, for the last time, the soul would sing the old song:

Is there a river wider than you, Enesai,

Is there a land more beloved than you, Enesai,

Is there a sorrow deeper than you, Enesai,

Is there a freedom freer than you, Enesai?

There is no river wider than you, Enesai,

There is no land more beloved than you, Enesai,

There is no sorrow deeper than you, Enesai,

There is no freedom freer than you, Enesai.

On the burial mound, beside the open grave, the hero's body was lifted over the heads of his people and shown the four corners of the world. The people chanted: "Here is your river. Here is your sky. Here is your earth. Here are we, born of the same root as you. We have come to see you off. Sleep in peace." And, to keep his memory alive for future generations, a rock was set upon his grave.

During the days of the funeral, the yurts of the whole tribe were put up in a row along the riverbank, so that every family could bid the hero good-bye from its doorway as his body was carried past. Every family lowered the white flag of mourning to the ground, wailing and weeping. Then it joined the procession as it went on to the next yurt, where the people would once more bow the white flag of mourning and weep and wail, and so on to the end, until they came to the burial mound.

In the morning of that day, when the sun rose for its daily journey, all preparations were complete. The standards with horsetails on their staffs and the hero's battle dress and armor had been brought out. His horse was covered with the funeral cloth. The musicians were ready to blow into their karnais—their battle trumpets; the drummers were ready to strike their drums so that the whole taiga would rock, and birds would fly up like a cloud into the sky and whirl overhead with screams and moans, and beasts would rush, gasping and snorting, through the forest thickets, and grass would bow to earth, and echoes rumble in the mountains, and mountains tremble. The mourners loosened their hair ready to weep and chant in praise of the dead hero Kulche. The warriors dropped on one knee, to raise the mortal body on their powerful shoulders. Everyone was ready, waiting for the body to be carried out. And at the edge of the woods nine sacrificial mares, nine bulls, and nine times nine sheep stood tethered, to be slaughtered for the funeral feast.

But now came something unforeseen. Although the tribes along the Enesai warred constantly among themselves, it was the custom that on days when chiefs were being buried neighbors were not to be attacked. Yet now hosts of enemies, who had stealthily surrounded the encampment of the sorrowing Kirghiz tribe during the night, rushed out of their hiding places on all sides, and not a man had time to mount his horse or seize his weapons. A frightful carnage followed. Everyone was killed. The enemy had planned it so, in order to put an end to the proud Kirghiz tribe forever. No one was spared, so that none would be left to remember the crime and avenge it, so that time would bury all traces of the past with shifting sands. And who could tell, then, what had been, and what had not been . . . ?

It takes a long time to bear and rear a man, but killing him is faster than fast. Many people lay hacked to death in pools of blood. Many had leaped into the river to escape from the swords and spears, and drowned in the waves of the Enesai. And all along the bank, along the cliffs and rocks, the Kirghiz yurts were flaming, for miles and miles. No one had managed to escape, no one survived. Everything was burned and destroyed. The bodies of the vanquished were thrown from the cliffs into the Enesai. The enemies rejoiced: "Now these lands are ours! These woods are ours! These herds are ours!"

The enemies were leaving with rich booty and never noticed the two children, a boy and a girl, coming home from the forest. Mischievous and disobedient, they had run off into the woods that morning to strip bark for baskets. In the excitement of their game, they had gone deeper and deeper into the thickets. Hearing the din and noise of the attack, they rushed back, but found nobody alive—neither their fathers, nor their mothers, nor their brothers and sisters. The children remained without kith or kin. They ran,

crying, from one burnt yurt to another, but did not find a single living soul. In one hour, they were turned into orphans, alone in the whole world. And in the distance billowed a cloud of dust; the enemies were driving to their own lands the herds and flocks seized in the bloody raid.

The children saw the dust raised by the hooves and ran after it. After their cruel enemies the children ran, weeping and calling. Only children would do such a thing. Instead of hiding from the murderers, they tried to catch up with them. Anything seemed better than being left alone. Any place seemed better than their dreadful, wrecked, accursed home. Hand in hand, the boy and the girl ran after the herds, crying out to the people to wait, to take them along. But how could their feeble voices be heard amidst the neighing and the clattering of hooves, how could children overtake the raiders, galloping hotly away with their booty?

The boy and the girl ran for a long time, but they never caught up with the enemy. At last, exhausted, they fell upon the ground. They were afraid to look around them, they were afraid to stir. They pressed themselves to one another and never noticed when they fell asleep.

It's not for nothing people say an orphan has seven destinies. The night passed safely. No beast had touched the children, no forest monsters had dragged them off into the woods. When they awakened, it was morning. The sun shone brightly. Birds were singing. The children rose and followed the raiders' trail again. On the way they picked berries and roots. They walked and walked, and on the third day they halted on a mountain and looked down. Below, on a wide green meadow a great feast was in progress. There were yurts without number, rows upon rows of smoking fires, and countless multitudes of people. Young girls flew up and down in swings, singing songs. Powerful men circled around each other like golden eagles to amuse the people, wrestling one another to the ground. Those were the enemies, celebrating their victory.

The boy and girl stood on the mountain, not venturing to approach. But the desire to be near the fires was too strong —a tasty smell of roasting meat, bread, and wild onions came from them. The children could not resist and came down from the mountain. The hosts wondered at the newcomers, surrounded them:

"Who are you? Where are you from?"

"We are hungry," said the boy and the girl. "Give us something to eat."

The people guessed who they were from their manner of speech. They shouted, argued—should they, or should they not kill the children, the remaining enemy seed, at once, or take them to the khan? While they

disputed, a kind woman managed to slip the children pieces of roast horsemeat. They were dragged off to the khan, but they could not let go of the food. They were brought to a tall red yurt, guarded by warriors with silver hatchets. And the troubling news that children of the Kirghiz tribe appeared from who knows where in the encampment spread among the people like wildfire. What could it mean? Everyone abandoned the games and the feasting and came running in a huge crowd to the khan's tent. The khan was at that moment sitting on a snow-white rug with his leading warriors, drinking koumyss sweetened with honey, listening to songs of praise. When the khan heard why the people had come to him, he flew into a mighty rage: "How dare you trouble me? Haven't we exterminated the Kirghiz tribe, to the last man? Have I not made you masters of the Enesai for all time? Why have you gathered here, cowardly souls? Look who it is before you! Hey, Pockmarked Lame Old Woman," cried the khan. And when she stepped out of the crowd, he said to her: "Take them away into the taiga and do what is needed to put a final end to the Kirghiz tribe, so that no trace of it is left, so that its name is forgotten forever. Go, Pockmarked Lame Old Woman, do as I bid you . . ."

The Pockmarked Lame Old Woman obeyed silently. She took the boy and girl by the hand and led them away. For a long time they walked through forest, then they came to the bank of the Enesai, to a high cliff rising over it. The Pockmarked Lame Old Woman stopped the children and placed them side by side at the edge of the cliff. And, before pushing them down, she said:

"O great river Enesai! If a mountain should be cast into your depth, the mountain will sink like a small stone. If a century-old pine should be cast down, it will be carried off like a small twig. Take, then, into your waters two grains of sand, two human children. There is no room for them on earth. Am I to tell you, Enesai? If the stars became men, the sky would not be wide enough for them. If the fish became men, the rivers and the seas would not suffice for them. Am I to tell you, Enesai? Take them and carry them away. Let them leave our weary world in childhood, with pure souls, with a child's conscience, unstained by evil thoughts and evil deeds, so they will never know human pain or cause suffering to others. Take them, take them, great Enesai . . ."

The boy and the girl wept and sobbed. They neither heard nor understood the old woman's words. Just looking down from the height filled them with terror. And down below the wild waves raged, rolling over one another.

"Embrace now, little children, for the last time, say good-bye to one another," said the Pockmarked Lame Old Woman. She folded up her sleeves to make it easier to push them down the cliff. And then she said: "Forgive me

children. This must be your destiny—yet it is not of my own will that I shall do this deed, but for your own good. . . ."

But just as she had spoken, a voice was heard:

"Wait, big wise woman, do not kill the innocent children."

The Pockmarked Lame Old Woman turned, looked, and wondered: before her stood a deer, a mother deer. Her eyes were huge and filled with sorrow and reproach. She was as white as the first milk of a young doe. Her belly was covered with soft brown fur like a young camel's. Her horns were of rare beauty, spreading wide like the branches of a tree in autumn. And her udders were as pure and smooth as the breasts of a nursing woman.

"Who are you? Why do you speak in the human tongue?" asked the Pockmarked Lame Old Woman.

"I am the Mother Deer," she answered. "And I speak in human words because you will not understand me and will not obey me otherwise."

"What do you wish, Mother Deer?"

"Let the children go, big wise woman. I beg you, give them to me."

"What do you want them for?"

"Men killed my twins, my two fawns. I am looking for children."

'You wish to nurse and rear them?"

'Yes, big wise woman.''

"Have you thought properly about it, Mother Deer?" laughed the Pockmarked Lame Old Woman. "They are human children. They will grow up and kill your fawns."

"When they grow up they will not kill my fawns," re-plied the Mother Deer. "I shall be their mother, and they, my children. Will they kill, then, their own sisters and brothers?"

"Oh, you can't tell, Mother Deer, you do not know men." The Pockmarked Lame Old Woman shook her head. "They have no pity for one another, and you talk of forest animals. I would give you these orphans, so you might learn the truth of my words yourself, but even these children will be killed by people. Why do you need all that grief?"

"I shall lead the children away into a distant land where nobody will find them. Spare the children, big wise woman, let them go. I shall be a

faithful mother to them. My udder is full. My milk is crying out for children. It is begging for children."

"Well, if that is so," said the Pockmarked Lame Old Woman after thinking a while, "take them, and lead them away from here as fast as you can go. Take the orphans to your distant land. But if they perish on the long journey, if robbers kill them, if your human children repay you with black ingratitude, blame it on yourself."

The Mother Deer thanked the Pockmarked Lame Old Woman. And to the boy and the girl she said:

"Now I am your mother, you are my children. I shall lead you to a distant land, where a hot sea, Issyk-Kul, lies in the midst of snowy mountains."

Happily, the boy and the girl ran after the Horned Mother Deer. But soon they tired and weakened, and the way was long—from one end of the world to another. They would not have gone far but for the Horned Mother Deer: she fed them her milk and warmed them with her body at night. And so they walked and walked. Their old homeland, Enesai, was farther and farther behind them, but their new home, Issyk¬Kul, was still a long way off. A summer and a winter, a spring and a summer and an autumn, and yet another winter and another spring and summer and autumn they journeyed through dense forest and parched steppe, over shifting sands, across high mountains and rushing streams. They were pursued by packs of wolves, but the Horned Mother Deer would take the children on her back and carry them away from the ravening beasts. Hunters with bows and arrows galloped after them on their horses, shouting: "A deer has stolen human children! Hold it! Catch it!" And they sent arrows flying at them. The Horned Mother Deer carried the children away from them, too, from those unbidden saviors. She ran faster than an arrow and only whispered, "Hold on to me tightly, my children, we are being chased."

At last the Horned Mother Deer brought her children to Issyk-Kul. They stood on a high mountain and marveled. All around them were snowy mountain ranges, and below, amid mountains covered with green forests, stretched the lake, as far as the eye could see. Whitecapped waves rolled over the blue water, winds drove them from afar and drove them far away. It was impossible to tell where Issyk-Kul began and where it ended. The sun was rising on one side, and on the other it was still night. It was impossible to count the mountains around Issyk-Kul, or guess how many snowy mountains lay beyond them.

"This is your new homeland," said the Horned Mother Deer. "You will live here, plow the land, catch fish, and breed cattle. Live here in peace for a

thousand years. May your tribe last and increase. May your descendants remember the tongue you have brought with you, and may it be sweet for them to speak and sing in this tongue. Live as is proper for human beings. And I shall be with you and with your children's children for all time . . ."

This was how the boy and the girl, the last of the Kirghiz tribe, found a new homeland on the banks of the blessed and eternal Issyk-Kul.

Time flowed quickly. The boy became a strong man, and the girl, a grown woman. They married and lived as man and wife. And the Horned Mother Deer had not left Issyk-Kul; she lived in the surrounding woods.

One day at dawn, a storm swept Issyk-Kul. It roared and crashed upon the banks. The woman went into labor, about to give birth to a child. She was in great pain. And the man was frightened. He ran up the mountainside and called loudly:

"Where are you, Horned Mother Deer? Do you hear the noise of Issyk-Kul? Your daughter is giving birth. Come quickly, Horned Mother Deer, help us."

And then he heard a distant tinkling, as of a caravan bell. It grew louder and louder. The Horned Mother Deer came running. Upon her horns she carried a cradle—a beshik. It was made of white birch, and a silver bell was fastened at its head. This bell still rings on the beshiks of Issyk-Kul babies. The mother rocks the cradle, and the silver bell tinkles, as though the Horned Mother Deer were running from afar, hurrying, bringing a birchwood cradle on her horns.

As soon as the Horned Mother Deer appeared, the woman bore her child.

"This cradle," said the Horned Mother Deer, "is for your firstborn. You shall have many children—seven sons and seven daughters."

The mother and the father rejoiced. They named their firstborn Bugubai, in honor of the Horned Mother Deer. Bugubai grew up and took a beauty of the Kipchak tribe as his wife. And the clan of Bugu, of the Horned Mother Deer, began to multiply. The Bugan clan on Issyk-Kul increased in strength and numbers, and the Bugans revered the Horned Mother Deer. Over the entrance to their yurts, the Bugans embroidered the horns of a deer, so that all who approached would know that the yurt belonged to the Bugan clan. When Bugans repulsed invading enemies, when they competed in races, the cry "Bugu!" rang out, and always the Bugans were the winners. And in the forests around Issyk-Kul wandered white horned deer whose beauty was envied by the stars in heaven. They were the children of the Horned Mother

Deer. No one touched them, everyone protected them. When a Bugan met a deer, he would dismount and yield the way to it. The beauty of a beloved girl was compared to the beauty of a white deer.

So it was until the death of a certain very rich, very important Bugan. He had owned a thousand thousand sheep, a thousand thousand horses, and all the people around were his shepherds. His sons arranged a great funeral feast. They invited to the feast the most famous men from all ends of the earth. A thousand yurts were set up for the guests along the bank of Issyk-Kul. No one knows how many animals were slaughtered, how much koumyss was drunk, how many platters of fine delicacies were served. The rich man's sons went about with their heads high: let people know what wealthy and generous heirs remained after the dead, how much they honored their father and his memory. . . . (Ah, my son, it's bad when men seek to distinguish themselves not by their wisdom, but their wealth!)

And singers, mounted on stallions presented to them by the dead man's sons, resplendent in their gift sable hats and silk robes, vied with each other in praising the dead and his heirs:

"Where under the sun will you see such a happy life, such a splendid funeral feast?" sang one.

"The like of this has not been seen from the day of creation!" sang another.

"Nowhere except among us are parents revered so greatly. Nowhere do sons render so much honor to their fathers' memories and their holy names," sang a third.

"Hey, singers, makers of verse, what's all this idle noise? What words are great enough to equal such bounty? What words are bright enough to tell the dead man's glory?" sang a fourth.

And so they went on day and night. (Ah, my son, it's bad when poets compete in singing praises—they turn from singers into enemies of song!)

The famous funeral feast went on and on, as though it were a celebration of some holy day. The vain sons of the rich man wanted to outdo all others, to put all others in the shade, to send their own fame ringing throughout the land. And then they took it into their heads to set the horns of a deer over their father's grave, to make it known to everyone that this was the resting place of their glorious parent, who belonged to the clan of the Horned Mother Deer. (Ah, my son, even in olden times it was said that riches lead to pride, and pride to madness.)

The sons of the rich man decided to do their father this unheard-of honor, and nothing could hold them back. They did as they said. They sent out hunters. The hunters killed a deer and chopped off his horns. And the horns were wide as the wings of a soaring eagle. The sons liked the horns. They had eighteen branches each—that meant the deer was eighteen years old. A pair of great, magnificent horns! The sons com¬manded craftsmen to set the horns upon their father's grave.

The old men of the clan were angered:

"By what right was a deer brought down? Who dared to raise a hand against the children of the Horned Mother Deer?"

But the rich man's heirs replied:

"The deer was killed on our land. And everything that walks, or crawls, or flies on our possessions, from a camel to a fly, is ours. We know ourselves how to dispose of what is ours. Get you hence!"

The servants of the rich sons lashed the old men with whips, set them upon their horses, back to front, and drove them out in disgrace.

And that was the beginning. Great trouble came to the descendants of the Horned Mother Deer. Almost everyone began to hunt the white deer in the forests. Every Bugan deemed it his duty to set deer's horns on his ancestors' graves. This came to be considered a good thing, a token of respect for the memory of the dead. And those who were unable to procure the horns, were now looked down on and held to be unworthy. People began to trade in deer horns, to stock them up for the future. There were even some men of the clan of the Horned Mother Deer who made it their livelihood to kill deer for their horns and sell them for money. (Ah, my son, where money enters, there is no room for a kind word, no room for beauty.)

It was an evil time for the deer in the Issyk-Kul forests. There was no mercy for them. The deer ran up the steepest cliffs, but even there they found no safety. Packs of hunting dogs were set loose to drive them straight toward hunters hiding in the bushes, and the hunters struck them down with never a bullet going astray. The deer were killed in herds, in droves. People laid wagers as to who would get more horns, or finer ones, with the largest number of branches on them.

And there were no more deer. The mountains became deserted. There was no sound of deer at midnight or at dawn. No longer could men see, in woods or clearings, deer grazing, leaping with their horns thrown back, crossing abysses like flying birds. Men were born who had never seen a deer

in all their lives. They only heard old tales about them and saw the horns on ancient graves.

And what became of the Horned Mother Deer?

She took offense, she took grievous offense at people. It is said that when the deer no longer could find safety any-where from bullets and hunting dogs, when so few deer were left that you could count them on your fingers, the Horned Mother Deer went up onto the highest mountain, said goodbye to Issyk-Kul, and led away her last remaining children over the great pass, to other regions and other mountains.

Such are the things that happen on earth. And this is the tale. Believe it or don't believe it, as you will.

And when the Horned Mother Deer was leaving, she said that she would never return . . .

5

It was autumn again in the mountains. Again, after a noisy summer, everything was still. The dust had settled after the cattle had been driven away. The fires were out. The herds were gone for the winter. The men were gone. The mountains were deserted.

The eagles were already flying singly, sending out their throaty, guttural cries. The noise of the river was muted: the river had grown used to its bed during the summer, had scraped it smoother, had grown shallower. Grass ceased to grow and began to wither on the root. The leaves, wearied of clinging to the branches, began to drop.

And fresh, silvery snow was already settling overnight upon the highest peaks. By morning the dark ranges would turn hoary like the necks of silver foxes.

The wind grew colder, gathered chill as it blew through the canyons. But the days were still bright and dry.

The woods across the river from the forest post were rapidly entering the fall. From the very edge of the water and up to the line of the Black Forest, the smokeless fire of autumn ran over the steep wall of the smaller leafy trees. Brightest of all—a flaming orange—were the birch and aspen thickets which climbed persistently up to the heights of the great forest just below the snow line, to the dark kingdom of pines and firs.

In the Black Forest it was clean, as always, and severe as in a temple. Nothing but the hard, brown trunks, the dry fragrance of resin, the rusty needles thickly carpeting the forest floor. Nothing but the wind, silently flowing among the crowns of the old pines.

But today the mountain quiet was shattered by the ceaseless chattering of startled jackdaws. In a large, furiously screaming flock they circled around and around over the pine forest. They had taken alarm at the very first stroke of the ax, and now, clamoring all at once, as though they had been robbed in broad daylight, they pursued the two men who were maneuvering a felled pine tree down the mountainside.

The pine was dragged by chains attached to a horse's harness. Orozkul walked first, leading the horse by the bridle. Like a bull, with his head thrust forward, his coat catching at the bushes, he breathed heavily. Behind him and

behind the log, Grandpa Momun hurried to keep up. It was hard for him too. In his hands he held a birchwood pole with which he guided the log. The log kept getting stuck over stumps and rocks. And at the steep descents it stubbornly tried to slip crosswise and roll down. That would be a disaster—it would surely smash a man to death.

The most dangerous part fell to the one who walked behind, controlling the log with the pole. But you never could tell. Orozkul had already jumped aside several times, leaving the bridle. And each time he was scalded with shame at the sight of the old man straining to hold the log at the risk of his life and waiting for Orozkul to return to the horse and take him by the bridle. But men speak truly when they say that, to conceal one's shame, one has to heap shame on an¬other.

"What's the matter, are you trying to do me in?" Orozkul shouted at his father-in-law.

There was no one around to hear Orozkul or to judge him. His father-in-law answered meekly that he himself could also have been struck down by the log; why shout at him as though he were doing it on purpose?

But this infuriated Orozkul still more.

"Just listen to him!" he growled indignantly. "If you are smashed, it's no great loss, you've lived your life. Why should you care? But if I am gone, who will take your daughter? Who needs her, barren as a devil's whip . . ."

"You are a hard man, my son. You've no respect for others," Momun replied.

Orozkul, unaccustomed to any opposition, halted, measuring the old man with his glance:

"Old men like you have long been lying by their hearths, warming their butts in the ashes. And you're still earning wages, whatever they are. And how come you're earning those wages? Because of me. What other respect do you want?"

"Oh, never mind, it just slipped out," Momun gave in.

They went on. After another stretch, they stopped for a rest. The horse was lathered and dark with sweat.

And the jackdaws still circled overhead, refusing to calm down. The sky was black with them, and they kept screaming as if their only concern that day was to keep up that deafening clamor.

"They sense an early winter coming," said Momun, trying to divert the conversation and assuage Orozkul's anger. "Getting ready to leave. They don't like to be disturbed," he added, as though apologizing for the stupid birds.

"Who disturbs them?" Orozkul turned sharply, his face suddenly purple. "You babble too much, old man," he said quietly, with a threat in his voice.

"Hinting," he thought. "I'm not supposed to touch a pine or cut a branch—just for the sake of his damned jackdaws. We'll see about that. I am still the master here." He threw a vicious glance at the frantic birds.

"If only I had a machine gun now!" And he turned away with an obscene oath.

Momun was silent. It was not the first time he had to listen to Orozkul's swearing. "It's come over him again," the old man thought sadly. "Takes a drink and turns into a beast. And when he has a hangover, you daren't say a word either. What makes people get like that?" Momun grieved silently. "You do them good, and they reply with evil. And nothing will make him stop and think, or feel ashamed. As though that's the way it has to be. Always sure he's right. So long as he is comfortable. Everybody around must jump to please him. And if you do not want to, he'll force you. It's lucky when a man like that sits in the woods, in the mountains, and has no more people under him than you can count on two fingers. But what if he is higher up, with more power? Heaven help us. . . . And there's no end to such men. They'll always grab theirs. And no place to escape from them. Wherever you turn, there he is, waiting for you, ready to shake the soul out of you, just to make life better for himself. And he will always prove himself right in the end. No, there's no getting rid of them . . ."

"That will do. Enough," Orozkul broke in on the old man's thoughts. "Let's get going," he ordered. And they went on with their task.

Orozkul had been in a black mood all day. In the morning, instead of crossing the river with the tools, Momun had hurried off to take his grandson to school. The old man was going into his second childhood! Every morning he saddled the horse to take the brat to school, then he'd ride off again to bring him back. Bothering with that abandoned little bastard. Imagine, he can't be late to school! When there's a job like this to be done, and God knows how it will turn out. The job can wait, eh? "I'll be back in a second," he says. "It would be a disgrace before the teacher to let the boy be late for class." The old fool! Who is she, anyway, that teacher? Going around five years in the same coat. All she thinks of is copybooks and schoolbags. . . . Always asking for a lift on the road to the district center, always short of one thing or another—coal for the school, glass for the windows, chalk, rags.

Would a decent teacher go to work in such a school? The names they'll think of—"midget school.' It's midget, all right. And what's the good of it? Real teachers work in the city. There the schools are built of glass. The teachers wear ties. But that's the city . . . All the high officials riding in the streets! And the cars! They make you want to stop and stretch out at attention until they roll by, those big, black, shiny, gliding cars. And the city people don't even seem to notice them, they're always in a hurry, always rushing somewhere. That's where the life is, in the city! If he could only move there, get himself a decent job. There, people are respected according to their position. If a man's supposed to get respect, he gets it! The bigger the position, the more respect. Civilized people. And if you visit someone or receive a present, you don't have to drag logs down mountains or anything like that to pay for it. Not the way it's here. A fellow will slip you fifty rubles, or, if you're lucky, a hundred, haul off the lumber, and then scribble a complaint against you: Orozkul takes bribes. Bastards. . . . Ignorant fools!

Ah, if he could only get to the city. . . . He'd send them to the devil—all those mountains and woods and logs, a hundred curses on them, and that empty-bellied wife of his, and the brainless old man with that pup he's fussing over like he was something special. He'd know how to live—he'd get himself going like a horse fed on the finest oats! He'd make people respect him properly. "Orozkul Balazhanovich, may I step into your office, please?" He'd marry a city woman. And why not? Some actress, maybe, one of those beauties that sing and dance with a microphone in their hands. People say the main thing such a woman cares for is a man's job. He'd take her by the elbow—himself dressed up, tie and all—and off they would go to the movies. She'd walk next to him, heels clicking on the sidewalk, smelling of perfume. And people would turn to sniff the perfume. Before you knew it, there'd be children. He'd send his son to school to be a lawyer, and teach his daughter to play the piano. You could tell city children at once, they were so clever. At home they spoke nothing but Russian; they wouldn't bother with country words. He'd bring his children up like that, too: "Father dear, mother dear, I want this, I want that . . ." Would a man stint any-thing for his own flesh and blood? Eh, wouldn't he put a lot of people in their place, show them who he is! In what way was he worse than others? Were all those, up above, any better? Just men like him—only luckier. And he had let his luck slip by. His own fault. After the forestry courses he ought to have gone on to the city, to technical school, or even college. He had been too much in a hurry, too anxious to get a post. A small one, but a post all the same. And now look at him, clambering over mountains, dragging logs like a donkey . . . And all those jackdaws on top of it. What were they yelling for, why were they circling over them around and around? Ah, if only he had a machine gun. . . .

Orozkul had good reason to be upset. He'd had himself a merry time all summer. The fall was coming on, and the end of summer meant the end of visiting with shepherds and herdsmen. How did the song go? "The flowers have finished blooming in the mountain meadow, time to go down into the valley . . ."

Autumn was here. And time for Orozkul to pay for all the honor, the dinners, the debts, and promises. And for the bragging: "What do you need? Two pine logs for beams? That's all? No trouble—just come and get them."

He'd bragged, received his presents, drunk their vodka, and now, dripping sweat, gasping, and cursing one and all, he had to drag those logs over the mountains. He had to pay through his nose. And, generally, all his life had gone awry. Suddenly, a desperate idea flashed through his mind: "Eh, I'll send it all to hell and run off wherever my eyes will lead." But he realized at once that he would not run anywhere. Nobody needed him, and he would not find the life he longed for anywhere.

Just try to leave or go back on your promises. Your pals will turn you in themselves. The people nowadays! Worthless trash. Year before last he had promised one of his own clansmen, a Bugan, a pine log for a gift lamb, and in the fall he didn't feel like climbing all the way up for a pine. It's easily said, but try to get up there and fell it and bring it down the mountain. Especially if the pine has stood there dozens of years. Why, no one in his right mind would want to tackle such a job, not for all the gold in the world. And, just as if in spite, old Momun was sick in bed at that time. And one man couldn't manage it—nobody could ever bring a log down by himself. He might be able to fell the pine, but never get it down. . . . If he had known ahead of time all that would come of it, he would have taken Seidakhmat and gone up with him.

Orozkul was too lazy to clamber for the log, and he decided to get rid of his clansman with any old piece of timber. But the fellow wouldn't have it. Nothing, but a genuine pine log would do. "You can take lambs all right, but you can't keep your word?" Orozkul blew up and threw him out: "You don't want this one? Then get the devil out of here." Well, the man was no ninny. He scribbled such a complaint against the overseer of the San-Tash Forest Preserve, filled with all sorts of truths and untruths, that Orozkul could have been shot as a "wrecker of the socialist woods." For a long time after that he was dragged before all sorts of investigating commissions—from the district center, from the forest ministry. He had barely managed to clear himself. . . . That's a kinsman for you! With all that stupid talk: "We're the children of the Horned Mother Deer. One for all, and all for one!" And then they're ready to go at each other's throats, or send a man to prison for a kopek.

It was a long time ago that people believed in the Mother Deer. How ignorant can you get? Ridiculous. Today everybody is civilized, everybody is literate. Who needs those Fairy tales? They're only good for children.

After that narrow escape Orozkul vowed to himself never Again to give as much as a twig or a splinter to anybody—not o acquaintances, not to kinsmen, let them be thrice children of the Horned Mother Deer.

But summer came. White yurts appeared in the green mountain meadows. Herds bleated and neighed. The smoke of fires rose by the banks of streams and rivers. The sun shone, the breeze carried the fragrance of flowers, the tempting smell of koumyss. It's good to sit in the fresh air outside the yurt, on the green grass, in a circle of friends, enjoying koumyss and lamb. Then wash it down with a glass of vodka, until your head begins to swim, and you begin to feel such Power in yourself that you could surely pull a tree up with its roots, or turn a mountain upside down. On such days Orozkul forgot his vow. It was sweet to hear himself called t he big master of the big forest. And again he would promise, again accept gifts. And again some centuries-old pine stood proudly in the woods, never suspecting that its days were numbered—just wait until the autumn months . . .

And autumn stole up quietly into the mountains from the harvested fields and nosed about in the woods. And wherever it passed the grass turned rusty, the leaves turned red.

Berries ripened. Lambs grew into sheep. They were divided into flocks —the ewes by themselves, the young rams by themselves. The women stacked dried cheeses in winter hags. The men discussed the order of their descent back into the valleys. And before leaving, those who had made agreements in the summertime with Orozkul would tell him the day and hour when they would drive up to the forest post with trucks for the promised timber.

That evening, too, a truck was coming with a trailer for two pine logs. One of the logs was already below, already brought across the river and dragged to the spot where the truck was to stop. This was the second one they were taking down. If Orozkul could now give back—throw up—all he had drunk and eaten for those damned logs, he'd do it instantly, just to be rid of the toil and misery he now had to endure.

Alas, there was no way of changing his wretched lot in the mountains. The truck was coming in the evening, to haul off the logs.

He would be lucky if everything turned out well. The road ran right across the Soviet farm, right past the office. There was no other road. And the Soviet farm had frequent visitors—the militia, inspecting commissions, and

heaven knows who else from the district center. If they caught sight of the timber, they'd start up right away: "Where from? Where to?"

Orozkul's back turned cold at the thought. And anger boiled within him against everything and everybody: the screeching jackdaws overhead, the miserable old Momun, that lazy good-for-nothing Seidakhmat, who guessed what was coming and left three days ago to sell potatoes in the city. He knew there would be logs to be dragged down the mountains, and so he slipped away. . . . And now he wouldn't be back until he finished all his business at the market. If he hadn't run off, Orozkul would have sent him to bring the logs down with the old man; he wouldn't have had to go through all this misery himself.

But Seidakhmat was far away, and the jackdaws were also beyond reach. He ached to give his wife a thrashing, but it would be a long time before he got home. There was no one left but old Momun. Growing more furious at every step, gasping in the thin mountain air, Orozkul walked head on through the bushes, sparing neither the horse, nor the old man behind him. Let him drop dead, that horse. Let him drop dead, that old man. Let him drop dead himself of heart failure. To hell with the whole world, where everything was wrong, where Orozkul was not appreciated according to his merits and position.

No longer able to control himself, Orozkul led the horse across the underbrush directly to a steep descent. Let Obliging Momun dance a little around the log. And let him just try and fail to hold it. "I'll thrash the old fool," Orozkul growled to himself. Ordinarily, he never would have ventured on such a dangerous slope with a log in tow. This time some devil must have tempted him. And before Momun had time to stop him, just as he was shouting, "Where are you going? Stop!," the log whipped sideways on the chain and, crashing through the underbrush, rolled downhill. The log was fresh and heavy. Momun tried desperately to block it with his pole, to hold it back. But the thrust of the log was so great that it knocked the pole out of his hands.

It all happened in a second. The horse fell and was dragged down on its side after the log. As it fell, it threw Orozkul. He rolled down, frantically trying to catch at the bushes. And at that moment some horned animals dashed in alarm through the underbrush. With high, strong leaps they bounded away and disappeared in the birch thicket.

"Deer! Deer!" Grandfather Momun cried out, beside himself with fright and joy. And instantly fell silent, as though he did not believe his eyes.

And suddenly all was still in the mountains. The jackdaws vanished. The log got stuck on its way down, crushing some strong young birches. The horse, tangled in his harness, rose to his feet by himself.

Orozkul, bruised and torn, crawled aside. Momun rushed to his aid:

"Oh, holy Mother, Horned Mother Deer! It was she who saved us! Did you see? They were the children of the Horned Mother Deer. Our Mother has returned. You saw it!"

Still disbelieving that they had escaped disaster, Orozkul stood up, sullen and shamed, and shook himself:

"Quit babbling, old man. That'll do. Get the horse un-tangled from the harness."

Momun obediently hurried to free the horse.

"Oh, miraculous Mother, Horned Deer!" he went on muttering happily. "The deer have come back to our forest. The Horned Mother has not forgotten us! She has forgiven our sin . . ."

"Still mumbling?" Orozkul snappped at him. He had already recovered from the fright, and his anger returned. "Again your fairy tales? Touched in the head himself, and thinks that others will believe his stupid notions!"

"I saw them with my own eyes. Deer." The old man would not yield. "Haven't you seen them, my son? You saw them yourself."

"Well, and what if I did—two or three of them . . ." "Right, three. I thought so too."

"Well, what of it? What's so damned great about it? A man could have broken his neck, and this one makes a fuss over some deer. They must have come across the pass. There are still deer, they say, on that side of the mountains, in Kazakhstan. There's a preserve there too. They came, so they came. It's none of our business. What has Kazakhstan to do with us?"

"Perhaps they'll settle here," Momun said dreamily. "If they would only stay . . ."

"That's enough," Orozkul broke in. "Let's get going!"

They still had to go a long way down the mountain with the log, then get the horse to drag it across the river. That was another difficult task. And then, if they succeeded in bringing it across, there was the job of pulling it uphill, to where the truck was to be loaded.

Orozkul felt altogether wretched. The whole world seemed unjust to him. The mountains—they felt nothing, wanted nothing, complained of nothing, just stood and stood there. The woods were drifting into autumn, then winter, and found nothing wrong with that. Even the jackdaws flew

about freely, screaming to their hearts' content. The deer, if they were really deer, had come from beyond the pass and would wander in the forest anywhere they pleased. In the cities, carefree people walked on paved streets, rode in taxis, sat in restaurants, enjoyed themselves. And only he was condemned to exile in these mountains, to this misery. . . . Even Obliging Momun, his worthless father-in-law, was happier than he: he believed in fairy tales. The old fool. Fools were always pleased with life.

Orozkul hated his life. This kind of life was not for him. It was for people like Momun. What did Momun need? Bending his back in labor day in, day out, without rest. And not once in his lifetime had he been master over a single man; forever ordered about by someone else. Even his old woman had him under her thumb, with never a word of protest from him. Such a miserable creature, yet a fairy tale could make him happy. Sees a few deer in the woods, and he's moved to tears, as though he's met his own brothers after searching for them for a hundred years.

Oh, what's the use . . .

They came at last to the final ledge, beyond which lay a sheer descent to the river. They halted to rest.

Something was smoking in the forest post across the river, near Orozkul's house. They could tell it was the samovar. Orozkul's wife was waiting for him, but this brought him no relief. He gasped for breath, his mouth wide open. There wasn't enough air. His chest ached, and in his head each heartbeat throbbed like an echo. The sweat dripping from his forehead made his eyes smart. And before him was still the long, steep descent. And the empty-bellied wife waiting at home. Ugh, prepared the samovar . . . Trying to please him. He had a sudden, violent desire to take a running start and kick that samovar to the devil, then throw himself upon his wife and beat and beat her till she started bleeding, till she dropped dead. He gloated, imagining her screams, her curses against fate. "Let her," he thought. "Let her scream. If I suffer, why shouldn't she?"

Momun broke in on his thoughts.

"Oh, how could I have forgotten, my son!" He hurried over to Orozkul. "I must go to the school, to pick up the child. Classes are over."

"And what about it?" Orozkul asked with deliberate calm.

"Don't be angry, my son. Let us leave the log here and go down. You'll have dinner at home, and I will ride down to the school. I'll bring the boy, then we'll come back and get the log."

"How long did it take you to think this up, old man?" Orozkul taunted him.

"The child will cry."

"So what?" Orozkul exploded. At last he had a pretext for loosing his full rage against the old man. All day he had looked for something to pick on, and now Momun himself provided it. "He'll cry, so we must leave our work? In the morning you nagged-1 have to take him to school.' All right, you did. And now 'I have to take him from school.' And what do you think I am? Are we playing games here, or what?"

"Don't, my son," begged Momun. "Not today. It doesn't matter about me, but the boy will wait, he'll cry—on such a day . . .

"What kind of day? What makes it so special?"

"The deer are back. Why, then, on such a day . . ."

Orozkul stared at him. For a moment he was speechless. He had already forgotten the deer who had flashed by—quick, leaping shadows—while he had rolled down over thorny bushes, his soul in his heels with terror. At any second he could have been flattened by the log.

"What do you take me for?" he snarled, breathing into the old man's face. "A pity you've no beard, or I would give you such a shaking you wouldn't think that others have less sense than you. What the devil do I care about your deer? Don't try your tricks with me. Get down to the log. And don't you dare to bother me about anything until we get it across the river. It's none of my business who goes to school, or who is crying. That's enough. Come on. . . ."

As always, Momun obeyed. He realized that he would not break away from Orozkul until the log was delivered, and he worked with silent desperation. He never uttered another word, although his heart was crying out. His grandson waited for him near the school. All the other children would be gone, and he alone, his orphaned grandson, would be looking down the road, waiting for his grandfather.

The old man saw in his mind the children bursting out of the schoolhouse all together and scattering to their homes, hungry after their classes. Already in the street they smelled the food prepared for them, and eagerly, excitedly, they ran past the open windows, each to his own home. Their mothers were waiting for them. Each with a smile that made their heads turn round. Life might be hard or easy for the mother, but she would always have a smile ready for her child. And even if she scolded, "Are your

hands clean? Go wash your hands!" her eyes would smile in welcome all the same.

Since he had started school, the boy's hands were always smeared with ink. This actually pleased Momun: it meant the boy was doing his work. And now the child was standing on the road, his hands ink-stained, holding his beloved schoolbag. He was probably tired of waiting, and looked and listened anxiously for his grandpa to appear over the hilltop on his horse. Because Momun was always prompt. By the time the boy came out of school, his grandfather would already be dismounted, waiting for him nearby. Everybody would go home, and the boy would run to his grandfather. "There's grandpa," he would say to his schoolbag. "Let's run." And when he came up to the old man, he'd stop, embarrassed. If no one was around, he'd fling his arms around his grandfather and press his face to the old man's stomach, breathing in the familiar smell of his old clothes and dry summer hay. These past few days Momun had been bringing the hay in large bundles from across the river. In winter it would be impossible to reach the hay through the deep snow; the best thing was to bring it over in the fall. AFter this autumn chore, Momun would go about for a long time smelling of the slightly acrid hay dust. The boy liked the smell.

The old man would put the boy lip on the horse behind him, and they would ride home eithef at a slow trot, or at a walk. Sometimes they were silent, sonietimes they would ex¬change a word or two about something unimportant. They'd get across the pass between the mountains, and then, before they knew it, they would come down iiito their own San-Tash valley.

The boy's enormous eagerness for school annoyed grandma. The moment he awakened, he quickly dressed and rearranged the books and copybooks in his schoolbag. It an¬gered the old woman that he always 1ept the schoolbag near him at night.

"Glued to his stinking schoolbag! Why don't you marry it—save us the bride money . . ."

The boy ignored grandma's wads. Besides, he didn't rightly understand them. The main thing to him was to get to school on time. He'd run into die yard and hurry his grandpa. And he would not calm down until the schoolhouse was in sight.

One day last week they were late, anyway. Momun had gone across the river mounted on his horse at dawn. He thought he'd bring some hay over fiirst thing that morning. It would have been all right, but the bundle got untied and the hay scattered. He had to tie it up t again and reload it on the horse. Because he had hurried, the bundle got untied a second time right by the riverbank.

And his grandson was already waiting for him on the other side. He stood on top of a jagged rock, waving the schoolbag and shouting, calling him. The old man hurried, and the rope got tangled; he couldn't straighten it. The boy kept shouting, and Momun saw that he was crying. He left the hay and the rope, and hastened across the ford to his grandson. But fording the river is a slow job, the current is strong and swift. In the fall it's not so bad, but in the summer it may throw the horse, and then you're gone. When Momun had finally gotten across, the boy was sobbing. He did not look at his grandfather, but kept repeating, "I'm late, I'm late for school." The old man bent down, lifted the boy into the saddle, and galloped off. If the school had been nearer, the boy would have run there himself. But now he cried all the way, and the old man could not quiet him down. And that was how he brought him, sobbing, to school. The classes had already started, and he led the boy right to his teacher.

Momun apologized and apologized to her, promising that it would not happen again. But he was shaken most of all because his grandson had cried so bitterly, because he had suffered so deeply over his lateness. "May God grant that you always love school so much," the grandfather thought to himself. And yet, why had the boy cried so uncontrollably? It meant there was some pain, some unexpressed pain of his own in his soul.

And now, as he was climbing down beside the log, jumping from one side to another, pushing and guiding it with his pole, Momun kept thinking about the boy out there.

But Orozkul was in no hurry as he led the horse. In truth, one could not hurry there. The way was long and steep. It was necessary to move slantwise. Still, he might have listened to the old man's plea to leave the log and go back for it later. Ah, thought Momun, if he had strength enough, he'd lift the log onto his shoulder, step across the river, and throw it down on the spot where the truck was to be loaded. Here, take your log and do not bother me again. And then he'd hurry off for his grandson.

But how could he! It was still necessary to get the log down to the riverbank, over the rocks and gravel, and then drag it across the ford. And the horse was already at the end of his strength, after climbing up and down the mountains all that time. They'd be lucky if everything went right, but what if the log got stuck among the rocks in the water, or the horse stumbled and fell?

When they entered the river, Grandpa Momun prayed:

"Help us, Horned Mother Deer, keep the log from getting stuck, keep the horse from stumbling." Barefoot, his boots slung over his shoulder, his trousers rolled up over his knees, Momun struggled, with the pole in his

hands, to keep up with the floating log. It was dragged slantwise, against the current. The water was as cold as it was clear. Autumn water.

The old man endured silently: never mind, his feet wouldn't drop off. If only they could get across without delay. And yet the log got stuck, as if in spite. It caught on the stones in the most difficult, rocky spot. In such cases, the horse must be allowed to rest awhile, then urged to move. A strong, sudden pull might dislodge the log from the rocks.

But Orozkul, sitting astride the horse, mercilessly whipped the weakened, exhausted animal. The horse slipped, stumbled, dropped on his hind legs, but the log would not budge. The old man's feet were numb, everything began to turn daA before his eyes, he was overcome with dizziness. The cliff; the woods above it, the clouds in the sky careened, stood sideways, tumb ed into the river, were carried off by the swift current, rettrned. Momun felt faint. The damned log—if only it had been dry! Dry wood floats by itself, all you need to do is keep it from rushing off downstream. But this one was freshly cut, and now try and drag it across the river. Who ever does such things? No wonder they had all this trouble. An evil deed can only have an evil end. Orozkul did not dare to let the log lie in the woods until it dried; one never knew when an inspector might drop in. Then he would send off a report that valuable trees were being cut down in the forest preserve. And so, the moment a tree was cut, it had to be removed out of sight.

Orozkul hammered at the horse with his heels, beat him on the head with the lash, and swore, and cursed at the old man, as though the whole thing was Momun's fault. And the log refused to yield, but sank still deeper among the rocks. And now the old man lost his patience. For the first time in his life he raised his voice in anger.

"Get off the horse!" He went to Orozkul and resolutely pulled him from the saddle. "Don't you see the beast can't pull? Get off, right now!"

Stunned with surprise, Orozkul obeyed silently. He jumped into the water straight from the saddle, in his boots. From this moment on he seemed to have turned deaf and stupid, to have been shocked out of his usual self.

"Come on! Bear down! Together now!" At Momun's command, they bore down on the pole, prying up the log, trying to free it from the rocks.

But what a clever animal a horse is! He gave a sharp tug iust at that moment, and, stumbling, slipping on the rocks, pulled the traces as taut as a bowstring. But, after shifting an inch, the log slipped, and was held fast in the rocks again. The horse made another effort, and this time he lost his footing and fell into the water, struggling there and tangling up his harness.

"Get to the horse! Get him up!" Momun pushed Orozkul.

Together, after much difficulty, they managed to get the horse back on his feet. The animal shivered with the cold and was barely able to stand.

"Unharness him!"

"What for?"

"Unharness him, I say. Take off the traces."

And again Orozkul obeyed in silence. When the harness was removed, Momun took the horse by the bridle.

"Come on, now," he said. We shall return later. Let the horse rest."

"Wait, now, just you wait!" Orozkul seized the bridle from the old man's hands. He seemed to have awakened, to have recovered himself. "Who d'you think you're talking to? You won't go anywhere. We'll get the log across right now. People are coming for it in the evening. Harness the horse, and no more talk from you, you hear?"

Momun turned without a word and hobbled on his cold- stiffened feet toward the bank.

"Where are you going, old man? Where are you going, I say?"

"Where? Where? To the school. My grandson's been waiting there since noon."

"Come back, now! Come back!"

The old man did not listen. Orozkul left the horse in tl; water and caught up with Momun at the very edge of 6 river, on tht pebbled slope. He caught the old man by 6 shoulder an4 twisted him around.

They stood face to face.

With a short swing of his arm, Orozkul tore Momuis cheap, worn boots from the old man's shoulder and smashd him on the lead and face with them.

"Get back to work! You!" Orozkul ordered hoarse', throwing away the boots.

The old man walked up to the boots, lifted them frcn the wet sant and straightened up. There was blood on ts lips.

"Swine" said Momun, spitting out the blood, and slu g the boots Over his shoulders.

This was said by Obliging Momun, who had never cci-tradicted an'zone. It was said by a miserable little old mai, blue with cold, with a pair of shabby boots over his should(rs and blood oh his lips.

"Corrie on, I say!"

Orozkul dragged him back to the river, but Momun broke away knd silently walked off without a backward lock,

"Watch out, now, old fool! I'll remember this!" Orozkil shouted after him, shaking his fist.

The old man still did not look back. Coming out on tae path near the "resting camel," he sat down, put on his boots, and rapidly walked home. Stopping nowhere, he went reedy to th stable. He led out the gray horse, Alabath, Orozkul's own riding horse whom no one was allowed to mount, who was never harnessed to a cart in order not to spoil his style. As though rushing to a fire, Momun rode cutof the yard on him without saddle or stirrups. And when he galloped past the windows, past the still smoking samovar, the women—Momun's old wife, his daughter Bekey, and young Guldzhamal—immediately understood that something had happened to the old man. He had never mounted Ala- bash and never galloped across the yard at such breakneck speed. They did not know as yet that this was the revolt of Obliging Momun. And they did not know what it would cost him in his old age.

Meantime, Orozkul was returning from the ford, leading the unharnessed horse by the bridle. The horse limped on one of his front legs. The women watched silently as Orozkul approached the yard. They were still unaware of what was going on in his mind and heart, what he was bringing them that day, what trouble, what terror.

In wet, sloshing boots and wet trousers, he came up to them with heavy steps and threw them a dark look from under his brow. His wife, Bekey, cried anxiously:

"What is the matter with you, Orozkul? What happened? You're all wet. Was the log carried off?"

"No." Orozkul waved her off. "Here"—he gave the reins to Guldzhamal —"take the horse to the stable." Then he turned toward his house. "Come inside," he said to his wife. The old woman wanted to go with them, but Orozkul did not allow her on the threshold.

"Go your way, old woman. There's nothing for you here. Get back to your house and stay away."

"What are you saying?" Grandma took offense. "What's all this about? And what about our old man? What happened?"

"Ask him," said Orozkul.

In the house, Bekey pulled off her husband's wet clothes, gave him a warm robe, brought in the samovar, and began to pour him some tea.

"No." Orozkul rejected it with a wave of the hand. "Give me a drink."

His wife took out a bottle of vodka and poured it into a glass.

"Fill it up," said Orozkul. He drank it in a single breath, wrapped himself in his robe, and, lying down on the rug, said to his wife: "You are no wife to me, and I am not your husband. Get out, and never set foot in my house again. Go, before it's too late."

Bekey sighed, sat down on the bed, and, swallowing her tears, as always, said quietly:

"Again?"

"Again what?" bellowed Orozkul. "Get out!"

Bekey jumped out of the house and, as always, wrung her hands and screamed for the whole yard to hear:

"Why was I ever born into this world, why must I suffer this misery?"

And, in the meantime, old Momun was galloping on Alabash toward his grandson. Alabash was a fast horse. Still, Momun was more than two hours late. He met the boy on the road. The teacher herself was leading him home. The same teacher, with the wind-roughened hands, in the same, shabby coat she had worn for the past five years. The weary woman looked glum. The boy, who had wept for a long time, walked next to her, swollen eyed, with his schoolbag in his hands, pathetic and humbled. The teacher gave old Momun a sharp scolding. He dismounted and stood before her with bowed head.

"Don't bring the child to school if you won't come in time to pick him up. Don't count on me, I have four of my

own.,,

Momun apologized again. Again he promised it would not happen anymore.

The teacher went back to Dzhelesai, and the grandfather turned homeward with his grandson.

The boy was silent, sitting on the horse before his grandfather. And the old man did not know what to say to him. "You're very hungry?" he asked.

"No, the teacher gave me some bread."

"And why are you so quiet?"

The boy said nothing.

"You take offense too easily," Momun said with a guilty smile. He took off the boy's cap, kissed him on the head, and replaced the cap.

The boy did not turn around.

They rode, both of them depressed and silent. Momun restrained Alabash, keeping a strong hand on the reins. He did not want to let the boy be shaken up on the unsaddled horse. Besides, there seemed no reason to hurry anymore.

The horse quickly understood what was expected of him and moved at a light trot, snorting now and then, his hooves tapping on the road. A fine horse, a horse to ride by oneself, singing quietly, just to oneself. There were many things a man could sing to himself. About dreams that never came to pass, about lost years, about the days when one was still in love . . . A man likes to sigh for the days when something was left behind, something forever unattainable. And yet, he never even knows rightly what this something was. But sometimes he wants to think about it, to feel his own self.

A good horse, a good companion . . .

And old Momun was thinking as he looked at his grandson's cropped head, his thin neck and wide ears, that all he had left of his whole unlucky life, of all his toil, all his sorrows, was this child, this still helpless little being. If he could only live long enough to put him on his feet. The boy would have a hard time if he was left alone. No bigger than a budding ear of corn, but already with a character of his own. He ought to be simpler, more easily affectionate. . . . Men like Orozkul would hate him and tear into him like wolves into a cornered deer.

Suddenly Momun remembered the deer that flashed by like swift shadows, the deer that caused him to cry out in joy and wonder.

"Do you know, my son," Momun said, "the deer have come to us."

The boy glanced quickly over his shoulder.

"Is it true?"

"It's true. I saw them myself. Three head."

"Where did they come from?"

"From over the pass, I think. There is a forest preserve there, too. The fall is still as warm as summer—the pass is open. And so they came to visit us."

"Will they stay with us?"

"If they like it here, they will. If no one touches them, they'll stay. There's food enough for them—even for a thousand. In old times, when the Horned Mother Deer was here, there were countless numbers of them around here."

Feeling that the boy was relaxing at the news, that he was beginning to forget his grief, the old man began to talk again about old times, about the Horned Mother Deer. And, carried away by his own tale, he thought: "How easy it is to feel happy and bring happiness to others! If we could always live like this." Yes, just as they were living at that moment. But life was not like that. Right next to joy, there was misfortune, watching out for you constantly, breaking into your life, following you always, eternal, inescapable. Even at that hour, when they were so happy, anxiety nagged at the old man's heart: What about Orozkul? What punishment was he preparing for the old man who had dared to disobey him? For Orozkul would not ignore it, or he would not be Orozkul.

And so, in order not to think about the imminent disaster awaiting his daughter and himself, Momun spoke to his grandson about the deer, about their nobility and beauty and swiftness with such self-oblivious joy as though this could somehow avert the inevitable.

And the boy was happy. He never suspected what awaited him at home. His eyes and ears were burning. Could it be true that the deer had come back? So everything his grandfather had told him was true. Grandpa was saying that the Horned Mother Deer forgave men's crimes against her and permitted her children to return to the Issyk-Kul Mountains. He was saying that three deer had come back to see how it was here, and if they liked it, all deer would return to their homeland.

"Ata," the boy interrupted his grandfather. "Perhaps it is the Horned Mother Deer herself who came here? Perhaps she wants to see how it is here, and then call her children?"

"It could be so," Momun said uncertainly. He hesitated, wondering: Had he not gone too far? Had the boy put too much faith in his words? But Momun did not try to dispel the boy's belief. It would have been too late now, anyway.

"Who knows." He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps. Perhaps it was the Horned Mother Deer herself. Who knows . . ."

"We can find out," cried the boy. "Let's go to the place where you saw the deer. I want to see them too."

But they don't stay in one place."

"We'll follow in their tracks. We'll follow and follow for a long time. And as soon as we catch sight of them we'll turn back. And then they will believe that people won't harm them."

"You funny child." The grandfather smiled. "Let's get home first, then we'll see."

They were already approaching the post along the path that ran behind the houses. A house from the back is just like a man from the back. None of the three houses gave any sign of what was going on inside. The yard was also empty and quiet. Momun's heart shrank with foreboding. What could have happened? Had Orozkul beaten his unhappy daughter? Had he drunk himself into a stupor? Why was it so quiet? Why was nobody out in the yard at this hour? "If everything's all right," thought Momun, "that blasted log will have to be dragged out of the river. To the devil with Orozkul, it's best to humor him—do what he wants, and forget it. You can't prove to an ass that he is an ass."

Momun rode over to the stable.

"Get down. We're home," he said to his grandson, trying to conceal his anxiety. But when the boy ran toward the house with his schoolbag, Momun stopped him: "Wait, we'll go together."

He put Alabash in the stable, took the boy by the hand, and walked toward the house.

"Now listen," the grandfather said to his grandson, "if they scold me, don't be frightened, don't pay attention to their words. It doesn't concern you. Your business is to go to school."

But nothing of the kind happened. When they came in, grandma merely gave Momun a long, disapproving look, compressed her lips, and resumed her sewing. Grandpa said nothing either. Frowning and tense, he stood a while in the middle of the room, then he took a large bowl of noodles from the stove, brought spoons and bread, and sat down with his grandson to a late supper.

They ate silently. Grandma did not even look in their direction. Anger was frozen on her flabby brown face. The boy realized that something terrible had happened. But the old people remained silent.

Such dense fear and disquiet settled over the boy that he could barely eat. There is nothing worse than silence at the dinner table, when people are absorbed in their own anger. "Maybe it's our fault," the boy said mentally to his schoolbag, which lay on the windowsill. The boy's heart rolled down to the floor, slipped across the room, climbed to the windowsill, nearer to the schoolbag, and whispered to it:

"You don't know anything about it? Why is grandpa so sad? What did he do? And why was he late today? Why did he come on Alabash, and without a saddle? This never happened before. Could he have been delayed because he saw the deer in the woods? And suppose there are no deer at all?

Suppose it isn't true? What then? Why did he tell me about it? The Horned Mother Deer will be very angry if he lied to us . . .

After supper, Grandpa Momun said quietly to the boy: "Go out into the yard, I have some business to attend to. You'll help me. I'll be out in a moment."

The boy obediently left. And as soon as he closed the door, grandma's voice rose behind him:

"Where to?"

"To get the log. It got stuck in the river," said Momun.

"Ah, thought better of it, eh?" grandma screamed. "Came to your senses? Go look at your daughter. Guldzhamal took her into her house. Who needs her now, your barren fool? Go, let her tell you who she is now. Her husband turned her out like a mangy dog."

"Well, he did, so he did," Momun said bitterly.

"Look at him! And who are you? Your daughters are no good, so you think you'll raise your grandson to be an important official! That brat! If it was somebody to risk your neck for, at least. And it is Alabash, no less, that you must ride. Just look at you! It's time you knew your place, time you remembered the kind of man you're bucking. . . . He'll twist your neck like a chicken's. Just wait! Since when did you begin to fly in people's faces? Great hero! And don't you even think of bringing your daughter here, I wouldn't let her on the doorstep . . ."

The boy walked across the yard with a bowed head. Grandma's screams continued in the house, then the door flew open, and Momun rushed out. The old man went to Seidakhmat's house, but Guldzhamal met him at the threshold.

"It's better if you don't go in now. Later," she said to Momun. He stopped in confusion. "She's crying, he beat her up," whispered Guldzhamal. "He says they will not live to¬gether anymore. She's cursing you. She says it's all your fault."

Momun was silent. What could he say? Now even his own daughter would not see him.

"And Orozkul is drinking in there. He's like a wild beast," Guldzhamal spoke in a whisper.

They stood in silence, thinking. Guldzhamal sighed sympathetically:

"If only Seidakhmat would come soon. He said he would return today. You'd bring the log over together, and be rid of that, at least."

"It's not the log so much. That's not the worst of it." Momun shook his head. He stood, thinking, then he noticed his grandson at his side. "Go and play awhile," he said to the boy.

The boy walked away. He went into the barn, took the binoculars hidden there, and dusted them. "We're in bad trouble," he told them sadly. "I think it's my fault, and the schoolbag's. If there was another school nearby, I'd run off with the schoolbag to study there—but so that nobody would know. The only one I would be sorry for is grandpa, he'd search for me. And you, binoculars, with whom would you be looking at the white ship? You think I couldn't turn into a fish? You'll see. I'll swim to the white ship . . ."

The boy hid behind the haystack and began to look around him through the binoculars. But he looked joylessly and briefly. At other times he could not get enough of it—the mountains, covered with autumn woods. White snow above, red flame below.

The boy put the binoculars back in their usual place. As he came out of the barn, he saw his grandfather leading the harnessed horse across the yard. He was going to the ford. The boy wanted to run to him, but he was stopped by Orozkul's shout. Orozkul jumped out of the house in his undershirt, his coat over his shoulders. His face was purple, like a cow's swollen udder.

"Hey, you!" he shouted threateningly to Momun. "Where are you taking the horse? Come on, now, put him back. We'll get the log without you. Don't

you dare touch it. You're nobody here from now on. You're fired from the job. Get out of here—go anywhere you wish."

The old man smiled bitterly and led the horse back to the stable. He suddenly became very old and very small. He walked, shuffling his feet, without looking at anyone.

The boy gasped. His breath stopped with anger and grief for his grandfather, for his humiliation. To hide his tears, he ran away down the path by the river. The path blurred before him, disappeared, then reappeared under his feet. The boy ran, crying. Here were his favorite boulders, the "tank," the ((wolf," the "saddle," the "resting camel." He said nothing to them. They understood nothing, they just lay and lay there. He merely put his arms around the resting camel's hump and, pressing himself to the rusty granite, sobbed .aloud, bitterly and inconsolably. He cried for a long time, gradually quieting down.

At last he raised his head, wiped his eyes, looked up, and turned numb.

Right before him, on the opposite bank, three deer stood by the water. Real deer. Real, living deer. They had come down to drink. It seemed they had been drinking for some time and had enough now. Then one of them, the one with the largest, heavy horns, lowered his head to the water again and, sipping slowly, seemed to examine his horns in the inlet, as in a mirror. He was reddish brown, with a powerful chest. When he tossed his head up, drops fell into the water from his lighter-colored, hairy lip. Faintly stirring his ears, the great horned animal gave the boy a close, attentive look.

But the one who looked longest at the boy was the white, high-flanked doe with a crown of slender, branching horns on her head. Her horns were slightly smaller than the male's, but very beautiful. She was exactly like the Horned Mother Deer. Her eyes were enormous, clear, and liquid. And she was as stately as a fine mare that foals every year. The Horned Mother Deer looked at him intently, calmly, as if trying to remember where she had seen this roundheaded, wide-eared boy before. Her eyes gleamed moistly, glowing from the distance. A whiff of steamy breath rose from her nostrils. Next to her, with his back to the boy, a hornless fawn was munch¬ing at some willow branches. He did not care about anything. He was well fed, strong, and merry. Abandoning the branches, he made a sudden leap, brushed the doe with his shoulder, and, after a few more playful leaps, began to fondle his mother. He rubbed his hornless head against the Horned Mother Deer's side. And she still looked and looked at the boy.

Holding his breath, the boy came out from behind the rock and walked, as though dreaming. His arms stretched before him, he walked to the bank,

to the very edge of the water. The deer were not the least bit frightened. They looked calmly at him from the opposite bank.

Between them ran the swift, transparent, greenish river, boiling up as it rolled across the underwater rocks. And if it were not for the river, it seemed to the boy that he could walk up and touch the deer. They stood on the even, clean, pebbled shore. And behind them, where the strip of pebbles ended, rose the flaming wall of autumn woods. Still higher, was the bare, clay ledge, and over it the golden and orange birches and aspens. And over all of this, the deep dense forest and white snow on the craggy summits.

The boy closed his eyes and opened them again. The picture before him did not change. The legendary deer still stood on the clean pebbled shore before the fiery-leaved thickets.

But now they turned and walked in single file across the bank and into the woods. First the large male, then the hornless fawn, and last the Horned Mother Deer. She glanced back over her shoulder at the boy again. The deer entered the thicket and walked among the shrubs. The scarlet branches waved over them, and red leaves dropped upon their smooth, strong backs.

They went up the path and rose to the clay ledge. Here they stopped again. And once more the boy thought that the deer looked at him. The male stretched his neck, threw back his horns, and sang out like a trumpet, "Ba-o, ba-o!" His voice rolled across the gap and the river in a long echo: "Aa-o, aa-o!"

And it was only then that the boy recalled himself. He dashed back home down the familiar path. He ran as fast as his breath allowed, raced across the yard, threw open the door with a bang, and shouted, gasping, from the threshold:

"Ata! The deer! The deer have come! They're here!"

Grandpa Momun glanced at him from the corner, where he sat, quiet and sorrowful, and did not answer, as if he had not understood his grandson's words.

"All right, stop shouting!" grandma snapped at him. "They're here, so they're here. That's all we have to think about!"

The boy went out quietly. There was no one in the yard. The autumn sun was already sinking behind Outlook Mountain, behind the row of bare, twilit crags. The dense, no longer warm sun glowed red upon the cooling, desolate mountains, and the chill glow scattered in wavering glints over the summits of the autumn ranges. The evening dusk was blanketing the woods.

A wind blew down from the snows. The boy shivered.

6

He shivered even when he got into bed. For a long time he could not fall asleep. Night was already black outside. His head ached. But the boy was silent. And no one knew he had fallen ill. He was forgotten.

And how could they help forgetting him?

His grandfather had lost his head altogether. He did not know what to do with himself. He would go outside, then come back; he would sit down, huddled, sighing deeply, then he'd get up and go out somewhere again. Grandma nagged at him angrily, but she too wandered back and forth over the house, stepped out into the yard, came back without apparent reason. From the yard came muffled, broken voices, hurried steps, curses. It seemed that Orozkul was cursing again. Somebody cried, sobbing.

The boy lay quietly, feeling more and more exhausted from all those voices and steps, from all that was happening in the house and yard.

He closed his eyes and, trying to console himself for his loneliness, for his sense of being utterly abandoned, turned his thoughts back to what had happened earlier, to what he longed to see. He stood on the bank of a wide river. The water flowed so fast that he could not keep his eyes on it long, it made him dizzy. And from the other bank the deer were looking at him. All three of them—the same he had seen that evening. And everything was repeated. The same drops fell from the wet lip of the horned buck when he raised his head from the water. And the Horned Mother Deer went on look¬ing attentively at the boy with her kind, understanding eyes. And her eyes were enormous, dark, and moist. The boy was astonished to hear the Horned Mother Deer sigh like a human being. Deeply and sorrowfully, like his grandfather. Then they walked away through the underbrush. The red branches swayed over them, and scarlet leaves dropped on their smooth, strong backs. They rose to the ledge over the sheer drop. They stopped. The large male stretched his neck and, throwing back his horns, sang out like a trumpet: "Ba-o, ba-o!" The boy smiled to himself, remembering how the voice of the big deer rolled over the river in a long echo. After that the deer vanished in the woods. But the boy did not want to part with them, and he began to invent the things he wanted to happen.

Again the wide, fast river raced before him. His head reeled from the rapid current. He leaped and flew across the river. Smoothly and softly he

landed not far from the deer, who still stood on the pebbled bank. The Horned Mother Deer called him and asked:

"Whose boy are you?"

The boy was silent; he was ashamed to tell her whose boy he was.

"My grandpa and I, we love you very much, Horned Mother Deer. We've waited for you for a long time," he said.

"I know you. And I know your grandfather. He is a good man," said the Horned Mother Deer.

The boy felt happy, but he did not know how to thank her.

"Would you like to see me turn into a fish and swim down the river to Issyk-Kul and the white ship?" he asked her suddenly.

He knew how to do that. But the Horned Mother Deer did not answer. Then the boy began to undress and, shivering a little, as he did in summer, climbed down into the water, holding on to a willow branch. But the water, surprisingly, was not cold. It was hot, stifling. He swam underwater with open eyes, and myriads of golden grains of sand and tiny pebbles whirled about him in a buzzing swarm. He began to suffocate, but the hot current still dragged and dragged him on.

"Help me, Horned Mother Deer, help me. I am also your son, Horned Mother Deer!" he shouted loudly.

The Horned Mother Deer followed him along the bank. She ran so fast that the wind whistled in her horns.

The boy threw off the blanket and felt easier at once. He was dripping with perspiration. Then, remembering that in such cases grandpa always covered him more warmly, the boy wrapped the blanket round himself again. There was no one in the house. The wick in the lamp had burned down and the light was very dim. The boy wanted to get up and get a drink, but again sharp voices came from the yard. Someone shouted at someone else, somebody was crying, somebody was trying to console him. There were sounds of a scuffle and stamping feet. Then two pairs of feet were heard outside the window, as if one person was dragging another, gasping and groaning. The door flew open, and grandma, furious and breathing hard, pushed Grandfather Momun into the house. The boy had never seen his grandfather in such a state. His mind seemed to be gone. His eyes wandered over the room without sense or recognition. Grandma shoved him in the chest and forced him to sit down:

"Sit down, sit down, old fool! And keep out of other people's business. Is it the first time they're fighting? If you want things to settle down, sit quiet and stay out of it. Do as I tell you. Do you hear? Or he will ruin us, he will destroy us altogether. And where are we to go in our old age? Where?" And with these words grandma banged the door and ran off somewhere again.

The house was quiet once more. The only sound was grandfather's hoarse, broken breathing. He sat on the bench by the stove, clutching his head with trembling hands. And suddenly the old man dropped on his knees and raised his hands with a moan, addressing heaven knows whom:

"Take me, take me, old wretch that I am! Only give her a child! I've no more strength to see her suffer. Just one child, take pity on us . . ."

Weeping and swaying, the old man rose and, groping along the wall, he found the door. He stepped out, closed the door behind him, and there, behind the door, he broke into choking sobs, covering his mouth with his hand.

The boy was sick. He shivered again. Now he was burning, now cold. He wanted to get up and go to his grandfather. But his hands and feet refused to obey him, his head seemed to be splitting with sharp pain. And the old man cried behind the door, and the drunken Orozkul ranted again in the yard, and Aunt Bekey screamed desperately, and the voices of grandma and Guldzhamal were pleading with them both, trying to quiet them down.

The boy escaped from them into his imagined world.

Again he was on the bank of the swift river, and on the other bank, on the pebbles, stood the same deer. And the boy broke into a prayer: "Horned Mother Deer, bring Aunt Bekey a cradle in your horns. I beg you, I beg you, bring them a beshik. Let them have a child." And he ran over the water toward the Horned Mother Deer. The water did not yield under his feet, but he could not get any nearer to the other bank, as though he were running on the same spot. And all the time he prayed and pleaded with the Horned Mother Deer: "Bring them a cradle on your horns. Make grandpa stop crying. Make Uncle Orozkul stop beating Aunt Bekey. Make them have a child. I will love everybody, I will even love Uncle Orozkul, but give him a child. Bring them a cradle in your horns . . ."

It seemed to the boy that he could hear the tinkling of a bell in the distance. It tinkled more and more loudly. It was the Horned Mother Deer running over the mountains, carrying a baby's cradle in her horns—a birchwood cradle with a tinkle bell. The cradle bell rang and rang. The Horned Mother Deer was in a hurry. The ringing came nearer and nearer.

But what was that? The throbbing of a distant motor joined the sound of the bell. A truck was going by. The hum of the motor grew louder and stronger, and the bell grew fainter; it tinkled with long breaks, then was lost altogether in the noise of the truck.

The boy heard a heavy truck stop near the yard, with the clanking of iron against iron. The dog ran out of the yard barking. For a moment the headlights flashed in the window, then went out at once. The motor stopped. The cabin door slammed shut. The new arrivals—there seemed to be three of them—passed the window under which the boy was lying, talking among themselves.

"Seidakhmat is home," Guldzhamal cried out joyfully, and the boy heard her run to meet her husband. "We thought you'd never come!"

"Good evening," unfamiliar voices answered her. "How is everything here?" asked Seidakhmat.

"Oh, all right. As usual. Why so late?"

"I'm lucky to be here at all. I went to the Soviet farm and started waiting for a car going this way. At least as far as Dzhelesai. And then they turned up—coming for logs," Seidakhmat was saying. "It's dark in the canyon. You know what the road's like .

"And where is Orozkul? At home?" one of the newcomers asked.

"He's home," Guldzhamal answered uncertainly. "He's not too well. But don't worry. You can spend the night with us, there's room enough."

They started across the yard, but halted after a few steps.

"Good evening, aksakal. Good evening, baibiche."

The visitors were greeting Grandpa Momun and grandma. So they stopped quarreling, they were ashamed to carry on before strangers, the boy thought. They met the guests in the yard, properly, as custom demanded. Perhaps Orozkul would, too? If only he wouldn't disgrace himself and the others.

The boy calmed down a little. He felt a little better now. His head did not ache as badly. He even thought of getting up and taking a look at the truck—was it on four wheels, or six? New, or old? And what kind of trailer did it have? Once, just last spring, they even had an army truck come into the yard—on high wheels and with a pug nose, as though someone had chopped off its front end. The young soldier at the wheel allowed the boy to sit for a while in the cabin. That was something! And an officer with golden shoulder

straps had gone with Orozkul into the forest. The boy had wondered why—nothing like that had ever happened before.

"Are you looking for a spy?" the boy asked the soldier. The latter grinned:

"Yes, for a spy."

"We've never had a single spy yet," the boy had told him regretfully.

The soldier laughed.

"What do you want a spy for?"

"I'd chase him and catch him."

"Wow, what a hero! Kind of young, though. Wait till you grow up a bit."

And, while the officer with the golden shoulder straps walked in the woods with Orozkul, the boy and the driver had a good talk.

"I love all cars and all drivers," said the boy.

"Why?" asked the soldier.

"Cars are fine, they're strong and fast. And they smell of gasoline. And the drivers are all young, and all of them are the children of the Horned Mother Deer."

"What? Whose children?" The soldier didn't understand. "What horned mother?"

"Don't you know?"

"No. Never heard such wonders."

"And who are you?"

"I'm from Karaganda, a Kazakh. I went to a mining school."

"No, I mean, whose are you?"

“My father's and my mother's."

And whose are they?"

"Their own mothers' and fathers'."

"And they?"

"Wait a moment, you can go on without end that way." "Well, I am the son of the sons of the Horned Mother Deer."

Who told you that?"

"My grandpa."

"I wonder." The soldier shook his head doubtfully.

His interest was caught by this roundheaded, lop-eared boy, the son of the sons of the Horned Mother Deer. How-ever, he was somewhat embarrassed himself when it turned out that he not only was ignorant of the origin of his clan, but did not even know the obligatory seven generations of his forefathers. All he knew were the names of his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather. And beyond that?

"Weren't you taught to remember the names of seven of your forebears?" the boy asked.

"No. What for? I don't know them, and I'm doing all right. I live like everybody else."

"Grandpa says that if people will not remember their fathers, they'll go bad."

"Who'll go bad? People?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Grandpa says that nobody will then be ashamed of bad deeds, because his children and his children's children won't remember them."

"You've quite a grandpa, haven't you!" the soldier said admiringly. "An interesting grandpa. But he fills your head with all sorts of nonsense. And you have a big head. . . . And a pair of ears like the antennas on our polygon. Don't listen to him. We're moving toward Communism, flying into space, and look what he's teaching you. I'd like to get him into some of our political courses; we'd educate him—one, two, three. Wait till you grow up and go to school, then get away from your grandpa. He's an ignorant man, uncivilized."

"My grandpa is a good man," the boy said. "I'll never leave him."

"Oh, that's just for a while. Later you'll understand."

Now, as he listened to the voices in the yard, the boy recalled that army truck and how he could not explain to the driver why drivers, at least those he knew, were the sons of the Horned Mother Deer.

The boy had spoken the truth. He had not invented anything. Last year, also in the fall, or even a bit later, the Soviet farm trucks had come into the mountains for hay. They did not pass the forest post, but turned off shortly before reaching it, where the road divided. They drove along the branch that led to the Archa hollow and then ran upward to the highland meadow where the hay had been prepared in summertime, to be taken to the farm in the fall. The boy had heard the roar of many motors from Outlook Mountain and ran down to the fork in the road. So many trucks at once! One after another. A whole column. He counted close to fifteen.

The weather was just about to change. Snow could begin any day; then it would be good-bye to the hay until next year. There would be no getting through. Apparently, they had been delayed by other business at the farm, and when the time grew short, they had decided to send out all the trucks at once. But their calculations were to be proven wrong.

The boy, however, did not know it then, nor did he care. Wildly excited, he ran to meet each truck, raced it for a while, then ran to meet the next one. The trucks were all new, with fine cabins and wide windows. And in the cabins were young fellows, each better looking than the next. In some of the cabins there were two fellows, the extra ones coming to help load and tie the hay. They all seemed to the boy brave, handsome, jolly.

And it was true. The boy was right. The trucks were in good shape, they rolled easily and fast down the slope past Outlook Mountain, over the hard smooth road made of crushed stones. The drivers were in a pleasant mood—the weather was fine, and here, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, came this lop-eared, roundheaded kid, meeting every truck as though crazed with joy. How could they help laughing and waving to him, and shaking a finger jestingly to add to his excitement and fun?

The last truck even stopped for him. The driver, a young fellow in a soldier's coat, but without shoulder straps, and without a military cap, looked out of the cabin.

"Hello, what are you doing here, eh?" He winked in a friendly manner.

"Oh, nothing." The boy was suddenly shy.

“Are you old Momun's boy?"

“Yes.”

"I thought so. I'm a Bugan too. In fact, all those fellows are. We're going up to get the hay. Nowadays, the Bugans don't even know one another anymore. Scattered all over. . . . Give your grandpa my regards. Tell him you saw Kulubek, the son of Chotbay. Kulubek. Tell him Kulubek has come home

from the army and now works as a driver at the Soviet farm. Well, see you." And in parting he gave the boy a military badge, a very interesting one. Looked like a medal.

The truck roared like a mountain lion and sped away, to catch up with the rest. And the boy was suddenly overcome with such a strong desire to go along with that brave, kindly fellow in the army coat, his brother Bugan. But the road was empty now, and he had to go home. He went back proudly, and told his grandfather about the meeting. And he pinned the badge to his chest.

Toward the evening of that day the San-Tash wind swept down suddenly from the highest range. It struck like a hurricane. The leaves rose in a column over the woods, and, swirling higher and higher into the sky, rushed howling over the mountains. In a moment everything was in a flying uproar—you could not open your eyes. And all at once—the snow. White darkness dropped upon the earth, the woods swayed, the river raged. And snow came down and came down in wild gusts.

The people at the post had somehow managed to get the animals into the stall, remove a few things from the yard, and bring as much wood as they could into the houses. After that they could not poke their noses out.

"What could it mean?" Grandpa Momun wondered and worried as he fired the stove. He kept listening to the howling of the wind and going over to the window again and again. Outside, the whirling snowy murk grew thicker and thicker.

"Sit down, will you!" grandma scolded. "It's not the first storm you've seen. 'What could it mean?'" she mimicked him. "It means that winter's here."

"All at once, in a single day . . ."

"And why not? If it wants to come, it comes. Expect it to ask your leave?"

The wind boomed in the chimney. At first it frightened the boy. He was chilled, too, after helping his grandfather take care of things outside. But soon the wood burned brightly in the stove, filling the house with warmth and the smells of heated resin and pine smoke, and the boy calmed down, warm and comfortable.

They had supper and went to bed. And outside the snow fell and swirled, the wind raged on.

"It must be very frightening in the woods," the boy thought, listening to the sounds outside the window. He grew worried when he suddenly heard

muffled voices and cries. Someone was calling out, someone answered. At first the boy thought he had only imagined it. Who would be coming to the forest post at such a time? But Grandpa Momun and grandma heard it too.

"People," said grandma.

"Yes," the old man answered uncertainly. Then, anxiously, "Where from? At this hour?" He hurriedly began to dress.

Grandma began to bustle too. She got up and lit a lamp. The boy was also anxious and dressed quickly. Meantime, the people had approached the house. There were many voices and many feet. Their boots creaked on the snow as the newcomers stamped across the porch and banged on the door:

"Aksakal, open up! We're freezing!"

"Who are you?"

"No strangers—we're from hereabouts."

Momun opened the door. Together with blasts of wind and cold and snow, the young drivers who had gone that afternoon to Archa to collect hay for the Soviet farm piled into the room, covered with snow from head to foot. The boy recognized them at once. And Kulubek, in his army coat, who had given him the badge. They led one man under the arms; he moaned and dragged his leg. At once there were alarmed cries from grandma and Momun:

"Astapralla! [note: “Heaven help us!”] What happened to you?" they wailed.

"We'll tell you later. There are more of us coming— seven fellows. If only they don't lose the way. Come on, sit down here. He sprained his foot," Kulubek spoke rapidly, seating the moaning young man on the bench by the stove.

"Where are the others?" Momun began to bustle. "I'll go and bring them." He turned to the boy: "Run over to Seidakhmat, tell him to come quick with a lantern, the electric one."

The boy jumped out of the house and gasped for air. He remembered that terrifying moment till the end of his life. Some shaggy, cold, whistling monster seized him by the throat and began to shake him. But he would not yield. He broke out of its clutches and, shielding his head with his arms, ran toward Seidakhmat's house. It was no more than twenty or thirty steps away, but it seemed to him that he ran and ran through the storm like a legendary hero racing to save his warriors. His heart was filled with courage and resolution. He felt himself mighty and unconquerable, and, until he reached

Seidakhmat's house, he had managed to perform feats that took your breath away. He leaped from mountain to mountain across abysses, he cut down hosts of enemies with his sword, he rescued men from fire and drowning, he pursued, in a jet bomber with a flying red flag, a shaggy, black monster escaping from him up and down cliffs and gorges. His jet flew like a bullet after the monster. The boy riddled him with machine-gun fire, shouting, "Kill the fascist!" And, wherever he went, the Horned Mother Deer was there. She was proud of him. When the boy was already at Seidakhmat's door, the Horned Mother Deer said to him, "And now you must save my sons, the young drivers!" "I'll save them, Horned Mother Deer, I swear I will!" the boy cried and hammered on the door.

"Hurry, Uncle Seidakhmat, come save our men!" He shouted so desperately that both Seidakhmat and Guldzhamal recoiled in alarm.

"Save whom? What happened?"

"Grandpa said to come quick with the flashlight, the electric one, the drivers from the Soviet farm lost their way."

"Damn fool, why didn't you say so right away?" Seidakhmat swore and ran for his things.

But the boy was not offended in the least. How was Seidakhmat to know what feats he had just performed to reach him, what an oath he had sworn? Nor was he especially upset when he learned that the drivers had been found by Momun and Seidakhmat right outside the post and brought safely home. It could easily have been different. Danger is easy when it's over. Anyway, the rest of the men were found too. Seidakhmat took them to his house. Even Orozkul had let five men spend the night at his place—he had had to be awakened, too. The rest had crowded in at Momun's house.

And the storm in the mountains would not subside. The boy kept running out on the porch, and a moment later he no longer could tell right from left, above from below. The stormy night swirled and raged. The snow reached up to his knees.

And it was only now, when all the drivers had been found, when they thawed out from the cold and fright, that Grandpa Momun questioned them in detail about the events of that day, although it was obvious that the storm had caught them on the way. The fellows spoke. The old man and grandma sighed sympathetically.

"Oh, oh, heaven preserve us," they exclaimed and thanked God, pressing their hands to their breasts.

"And look at you, fellows, in those light clothes," grandma chided, pouring them hot tea. "How can you go into the mountains dressed like that? Just like children. Showing off, trying to look like city folk. And what if you'd lost the way and had to spend the night outside, heaven forbid? You'd turn into icicles."

"Who could have known such a thing would happen?" Kulubek replied. "Why should we dress more warmly? The trucks are heated inside. You sit there as if it was your own home and turn the wheel. Why, even in planes—they fly so high these mountains look like molehills from up there—outside it could be forty below, and inside people go around in shirtsleeves."

The boy lay on a sheepskin among the drivers. He huddled close to Kulubek and listened wide eyed to the conversation of the grown-ups. No one suspected that he was glad the storm had come and made those fellows seek shelter at the post. Secretly, he hoped that it would go on and on, at least three days. Let the drivers stay at their house. It was so good, so interesting with them. And grandpa, it turned out, knew all of them—if not them, then their fathers and mothers.

"There," the grandfather said to his grandson with a touch of pride. "Now you've seen your brothers, the Bugans. You'll know what kind of kinsmen you have. Look at them! Oh-ho, how tall and handsome our young ones are getting today. May God send you good health. I remember, in forty-two, when they brought us to Magnitogorsk to do construction work. . .”

And grandpa began to tell a story the boy had heard many times before. The guests smiled understandingly: old men are fond of reminiscing.

"We're tall all right," said one of the men when grandpa finished his story. "And yet we bungled the job—we let the truck roll off the road. So many of us, and we couldn't handle it.''

"How could you?" Momun hastened to reassure him. "Loaded with hay, and in that blizzard. It happens. God willing, everything will be set right tomorrow. The main thing is for the wind to quiet down."

The fellows told grandpa how they had come to the upper meadow on the Archa plateau. There were three huge stacks of mountain hay prepared for them. They started loading all three at once, piling the trucks higher than a house, so that a man could not get down afterward except by swinging down a rope. They loaded truck after truck till even the drivers' cabins were covered—all you could see was the windshield, the hood, and the wheels. They wanted to get it all at once, so there would be no need for another trip. Everybody knew that whatever hay was left behind would have to wait till next year. The work went fast and smoothly. Each man whose truck was full,

drove it off to the side and returned to help load the rest. They managed to get nearly all the hay except for about two truckloads. After a short rest and a smoke, they agreed on who would follow whom, and started out all together in a column. It was a hard job coming down the mountains. They had to drive carefully, almost by feel. Hay is a light load, but it's inconvenient, even dangerous, especially on narrow roads and sharp turns.

They drove without suspecting what awaited them. After getting down from the Archa plateau, they followed the valley, and by the time they came out of the narrow pass, it was already evening. And then the blizzard struck.

"I've never seen it so bad," said Kulubek. "The sweat kept pouring down my back. All of a sudden everything turned dark, and the wind just tore the steering wheel out of your hands. It looked as if the truck would turn over any minute. And the road, you know, is so rough that even in the daytime it's not safe."

The boy listened with bated breath, without stirring, without taking his shining eyes off Kulubek. The same wind, the same snow he was talking about were raging outside. Many of the drivers and loaders were asleep by now, sprawled on the floor, dressed, boots and all. And everything they had gone through was being freshly relived by this roundheaded boy with the thin neck and large ears.

Within a few moments, the road became invisible. The trucks held close to one another like a row of blind men clinging to the leader, blowing their horns constantly to keep from going off to the side. The snow tumbled down like a solid wall, covering the headlights. The windshield wipers were not fast enough to clear the glass of rime. They had to drive leaning out of the side windows, but what kind of driving is that? And the snow came and came without a stop. The wheels began to skid, and the column had to halt before a steep rise. The motors roared like mad, but it was useless. The trucks could no longer make it uphill. The drivers jumped out of the cabins and ran to the front of the column, finding their way from truck to truck by the hallooing of those ahead. What could be done? It was impossible to make a fire. Remaining in the cabins meant burning up all the remaining fuel, and there was hardly enough left as it was to get them to the Soviet farm. Yet if they didn't heat the cabins they'd freeze to death. The fellows didn't know what to do. The all-powerful machinery stood powerless. Somebody suggested piling out the hay from one of the trucks and digging in. But it was clear that the moment the hay was untied, there wouldn't be a stalk left: the storm would sweep it off before you blinked an eye. Meantime, the trucks were being fairly buried under snow, the drifts had piled up higher than the wheels. The fellows lost their heads completely, chilled to the bone in the wind.

"Then suddenly I remembered, aksakal," Kulubek told Grandpa Momun, "how we had met our little brother Bugan on the road on the way to Archa." He pointed to the boy and stroked him gently on the head. "He was running by the roadside. I stopped a moment. Sure—to say hello. We talked awhile. Right? But why aren't you sleeping? It's late."

The boy smiled and nodded. But if anyone could guess how hotly and violently his heart began to beat with joy and pride. Kulubek himself was talking about him. The strongest, the bravest, the most handsome of all these fellows. If he could only grow up to be like him.

And grandpa, too, spoke words of praise, putting more firewood into the stove:

"That's how he is, our boy. He likes to listen to men talk. Look at him—all ears!"

"Well, I can't even imagine what made me think of him at that moment," Kulubek went on. "So I tried to tell the fellows—I had to shout, the wind blew all the words away. 'Let's try,' I shouted, 'to get to the forest post, or we shall perish here.' 'But how can we get there?' the fellows shouted back at me. 'We'll never make it on foot. And we can't leave the trucks here, either.' So I said, 'Let's try to push them uphill. After that the road is downhill all the way. All we need is to get to the San-Tash hollow,' I said, 'and from there on we can get to the foresters' on foot, it's not too far.' The fellows understood. 'Come on,' they yelled, 'take over the command.' Well, then . . . We started with the lead truck. 'Get into the cabin, Osmonaly!' And all of us, as many as we were, set our shoulders to the truck. It did start moving, but not for long. Our breath gave out. And there we were—we couldn't let go, either. It seemed to us that we were pushing a whole mountain uphill, not just a truck. And what was in it —a haystack on wheels! All I knew was that I yelled with all my strength, 'Come on! Come on! Come on!' But I couldn't even hear myself. Wind, snow, not a thing to be seen. The truck howled, screamed like a living creature, struggled with every ounce of strength. And there we were behind it, our hearts about to burst to pieces, our heads reeling . . ."

"Ah, ah," Grandpa Momun kept sighing. "Poor fellows —such trouble. It must have been the Horned Mother Deer herself who stood over you, her children. It was none but she who saved you. Or else, who knows. . . . You hear that? It doesn't quiet down outside, whirling and whirling."

The boy's eyes were closing. He tried to force himself to stay awake, but his eyes kept closing. And, half-asleep, catching fragments of the conversation, he mingled reality with imagination. It seemed to him that he himself was there, among the fellows caught in a storm in the mountains. He

saw the steep road rising up the dazzling, snowy mountain. The blizzard burned his cheeks, slashed at his eyes. They were all pushing up the truck with the hay, huge as a house. Slowly, slowly they inched up the road. And now the truck no longer climbed, it was giving up, sliding back. It was terrifying. The darkness was so dense, the wind so searing. The boy shrank with terror, afraid the truck would slip and crush them. And at this moment, the Horned Mother Deer appeared as if from nowhere. She pushed the truck with her horns, helping them, forcing it up. "Come on! Come on! Come on!" the boy cried out. And the truck began to move, up and up, until they reached the top, then it rolled downhill by itself. And they pushed up the second one, the third, and all the others. And every time the Horned Mother Deer helped them. Nobody saw her. Nobody knew she was right next to them. The only one who saw and knew it was the boy. He saw how every time when the men seemed to be failing, when the going got too difficult and it seemed their strength would not hold out, she would run over and push the truck uphill with her horns. "Come on! Come on! Come on!" the boy would cry. And all the time he was next to Kulubek. Then Kulubek said to him, "Take the wheel." The boy climbed into the cabin. The truck hummed and trembled. And the wheel turned in his hands as though of itself, as easily as the barrel hoop with which he used to play at driving when he was little. But suddenly the truck began to list, keeling over sideways. It crashed down and broke to pieces. The boy began to cry aloud. He felt disgraced. He was ashamed to look at Kulubek.

"What's the matter? What's wrong?" Kulubek woke him.

The boy opened his eyes. And his heart was filled with happiness because it all had turned out to be a dream. Kulubek lifted him up in his arms and hugged him.

"Dreamed something, eh? Got scared? Hey, you, great hero!" He kissed the boy with his hard, wind-roughened lips. "Come on, I'll put you to bed. It's time to sleep."

He put the boy down on the floor, on the rug, among the sleeping drivers, and lay down next to him, pulling him close and covering him with the flap of his army coat.

Early in the morning the boy was awakened by his grandfather.

"Get up," the old man said quietly. "Dress warmly. You'll help me. Get up."

The faint morning light was just beginning to filter in through the window. Everybody in the house was still fast asleep.

"Here, put on your felt boots," said Grandpa Momun. He smelled of fresh hay—he had already fed the horses. The boy stepped into his felt boots and they went out into the yard. There was a great deal of snow, but the wind had died down. Only from time to time some swirls of snow eddied across the ground.

"It's cold." The boy shivered.

"It's all right. Seems to be clearing," the old man mum-bled. "Just think of it! Such a blizzard, right off. Oh, well, so long as nobody was harmed . . ."

They entered the stall, where Momun kept his five sheep. The old man found the lantern on the post and lit it. The sheep looked up from the corner and stirred.

"Hold it," said Momun, handing the lantern to the boy. "We'll slaughter the black yearling. There is a houseful of guests—we must have the meat ready by the time they wake."

The boy held the lantern. The wind was whistling through the cracks. It was still cold and dark out in the yard. The old man threw an armful of clean hay by the entrance. He brought the black yearling to the spot and, before throwing her on her side and tying her feet, he crouched and thought awhile.

"Put down the lantern. Sit down, too," he said to the boy. Then he began to whisper, holding his open palms before him. "Oh, great progenitor, Horned Mother Deer. I sacrifice this black sheep to you. For saving our children in the hour of danger. For your white milk, which you fed to our forebears. For your kind heart and motherly eye. Do not abandon us on steep passes, on rough streams, on slippery paths. Do not abandon us ever on our land, we are your children. Amen!"

He passed his hands prayerfully down his face, from forehead to chin. The boy did the same. And then the old man, threw the sheep, tied its legs, and drew his old Asian knife from its sheath.

And the boy held the lantern for him.

At last the weather quieted down. The sun looked out, frightened, once or twice through rifts in the rushing clouds. The effects of the storm were all around: snowdrifts piled in all directions, broken bushes, young trees bent double under the weight of snow, old trees toppled by the wind. The forest across the river stood silent, hushed, somehow oppressed. And the river itself seemed to have shrunk, its banks, piled high with snow, grown steeper. Even the noise of the Water was muted.

The sun kept glancing out and disappearing. But nothing troubled or darkened the boy's heart. The perturbations of the night before were forgotten, the blizzard was forgotten, and the snow did not disturb him—in fact, it made things still more interesting. He dashed here and there, white powder scattering underfoot. He was happy because the house was full of people, because the fellows were talking loudly and laughing after a good night's sleep, because they ate the roast mutton with relish.

Meantime, the sun was also steadying itself. It brightened and came out for longer periods. The clouds were gradually dispersing, and it was turning warmer. The untimely snow began to settle, especially along the road and the pathways.

The boy became anxious only when the drivers and loaders prepared to leave. They went out into the yard, bade their hosts good-bye, and thanked them for the food and shelter. Grandpa Momun and Seidakhmat were going with them on horseback. Grandpa took along a large bundle of firewood, and Seidakhmat a zinc-lined cauldron to heat water for the frozen motors.

They started out from the yard.

"Ata." The boy ran up to his grandfather. "Take me with you, I want to come too."

"Don't you see I have the wood, and Seidakhmat has the cauldron? There's nobody to take you. And what do you want there? You'll just tire yourself out walking in the snow."

The boy was hurt. He sulked. Then Kulubek took him by the hand.

"Come with us," he said. "On the way back you'll go with grandpa."

They walked along the road to the spot where it branched off and ran to the Archa meadow. There was still a lot of snow. It wasn't as easy as the boy had thought to keep up with those strong young fellows. He began to tire.

"Come, get up on my back," Kulubek offered. With an agile movement, he lightly swung the boy up to his shoulders. And carried him as easily as if he did it every day.

"You're all right, Kulubek," said the driver who walked next to them.

"Oh, I've carried my brothers and sisters all my life," Kulubek boasted. "I'm the eldest, and there were six of us. Mother worked in the field, father, too. By now my sisters have their own kids. I came back from the army, still unmarried, still without a job. And then my sister, the eldest one, says 'Come

and live with us—you're a good nurse."Oh, no,' I said to her, 'I've had enough. I'll carry my own now . .

And so they walked, talking of this and that. The boy felt happy and secure riding on Kulubek's strong back.

"If only I had a brother like him," he dreamed to himself. "I'd never be afraid of anybody. If Orozkul wanted to shout at grandpa or touch anyone, he'd think twice at just a glance from Kulubek."

The trucks with the hay, left on the road the previous night, were nearly two kilometers from the fork. Heaped with snow, they looked like winter stacks in the field. It seemed that nobody would ever move them from the spot.

But the men built a fire and heated water. They began to crank the first motor by hand; it came to life and started sneezing. The rest was easier. Each following truck was started by towing, and so it went till all the motors worked.

When all the trucks were working, two of them towed up the one that had toppled over into the gully the previous night. Everybody helped to get it back onto the road. Even the boy found a spot at the edge and helped the men. All the time he was afraid that somebody would say, "Run off, stop tangling underfoot." But nobody said it to him, nobody chased him away. Perhaps because Kulubek had allowed him to help. And he was the strongest, they all respected him.

The drivers said good-bye again. The trucks started, first slowly, then faster. And the caravan went off along the road between the snow-covered mountains. The sons of the sons of the Horned Mother Deer were gone. They did not know that in the child's imagination, the Horned Mother Deer ran invisibly before them. With long, fast leaps she raced before the column. She protected them from trouble and mishaps on the difficult journey. From landfalls, avalanches, blizzards, fog, and other misfortunes the Kirghiz people had endured throughout their many centuries of nomadic existence. Wasn't this what Grandpa Momun had prayed for to the Horned Mother Deer when he had sacrificed the black ewe to her at dawn?

They were gone. And the boy was also going with them. In his mind he sat in the cabin next to Kulubek. "Uncle Kulubek," he was saying to him, "the Horned Mother Deer is running ahead of us along the road." "You don't say!" "It's true. Honest to God. There she is!"

"What are you thinking of?" Grandpa Momun broke into his thoughts. "Don't stand there. Climb up, time to go home." He bent down from the horse

and lifted the boy into the saddle. "You're not cold?" asked the old man, wrapping the flaps of his robe closely around his grandson.

In those days the boy was not yet going to school.

And this evening, awakening now and then from heavy sleep, he thought anxiously: "How will I go to school tomorrow? I'm sick, I feel so bad . . ." Then he'd drop off again. It seemed to him that he was copying in his book the words written by the teacher on the blackboard: "At. Ata. Taka." With these first-grade words he was filling the entire copybook, page after page. "At. Ata. Taka. At. Ata. Taka."[note: "Horse. Father. Horseshoe."] He grew tired, the letters jumped before his eyes and he felt hot, very hot. The boy threw off the coverings. And when he lay uncovered and froze, all sorts of visions came to him again. Now he swam as a fish in the chilly river, trying to reach the white ship and never reaching it. Now he found himself in a snowstorm. In a cold, misty hurricane, trucks filled with hay were skidding on the steep road up the mountain. The trucks sobbed like people, and skidded without moving from the spot. The wheels turned madly, became fiery red. They burned and sent up tongues of flame. Pressing her horns into the body of the truck, the Horned Mother Deer pushed the truckload of hay up the mountain. The boy helped her, straining every muscle. Hot sweat poured down his body. Then suddenly the truck turned into a child's cradle. The

Horned Mother Deer said to the boy: "Come, let's hurry, we'll take the cradle to Aunt Bekey and Uncle Orozkul." And they began to run. The boy fell back. But ahead of him, the cradle bell rang and rang. The boy followed its call.

He woke when steps were heard on the porch and the door creaked. Grandpa Momun and grandma returned, seemingly a little less upset. The arrival of strangers at the post had evidently forced Orozkul and Aunt Bekey to quiet down. Or, perhaps Orozkul had tired of guzzling and had finally fallen asleep. There was no longer any shouting or cursing in the yard.

At midnight the moon rose over the mountains. Its misty disk hung over the highest icy summit. The mountain, locked in eternal ice, loomed in the dark, glinting with its ghostly, uneven planes. And all around, the foothills, the cliffs, the black motionless forests stood utterly hushed, while the river boiled and tumbled over the rocks below.

The wavering light of the moon flowed in a slanting stream into the window. The light disturbed the boy. He turned from side to side, closing his eyes more tightly. He wanted to ask grandma to curtain the window, but he didn't: grandma was angry at grandpa.

"Fool," she whispered, settling down to sleep. "If you don't know how to live with people, you'd better hold your tongue and listen to others. Don't you know you're in his hands? He pays you, even if it's only kopeks. But you get them every month. And what are you without the pay? Lived all those years, and learned no sense. . .”

The old man did not answer. Grandma fell silent. Then suddenly she said aloud:

“If a man's pay is taken from him, he's no longer a man. He's nothing."

Again the old man did not answer.

And the boy could not fall asleep. His head ached, and his thoughts were confused. He worried about school. He had never missed a single day, and could not imagine how it would be if he was unable to go to school in Dzhelesai tomorrow. He also thought that, if Orozkul dismissed grandpa from his job, grandma would eat him up alive. What would they do then?

Why did people live like that? Why were some good, and some bad? Why were some happy, and others unhappy? Why were there people who made everybody afraid of them, and others of whom no one was afraid? Why did some have children, and others not? Why could some people refuse to pay others their wages? The most respected people, he thought, must be those who get the biggest pay. But grandpa got very little, and so everybody hurt and insulted him. What could he do to make grandpa get more pay, too? Maybe then Orozkul would also begin to respect him.

These thoughts made the boy's head ache even more. Again he remembered the deer he had seen the previous evening at the ford. How were they doing out there at night? They were alone in the cold, stony mountains, in the pitch black forest. They must be frightened. What if wolves attacked them? Who would bring Aunt Bekey the magic cradle in her horns?

He fell into a troubled sleep and, as he drifted off, he prayed to the Horned Mother Deer to bring the birchwood cradle to Orozkul and Aunt Bekey. "Let them have children, let them have children," he pleaded with the Horned Mother Deer. And he heard the distant tinkling of the cradle bell. The Horned Mother Deer was hurrying with the miraculous cradle in her horns.

7

Early in the morning the boy awakened from the touch of a hand. Grandpa's hand was cold, from the outside. The boy shrank a little.

"Lie, lie there." The old man blew on his hands to warm them and felt the boy's forehead. Then he put his palm on his chest and stomach. "I'm afraid you're sick," he said anxiously. "You have a fever. And I was wondering —why is he lying in bed when it's time for school?"

"I'll get up, right away." The boy raised his head. Everything began to turn before his eyes, and there was a noise in his ears.

"Don't even think of it." The old man settled the boy back on the pillow. "Who's going to take you to school when you're sick? Let's see your tongue."

The boy tried to insist:

"The teacher will scold. She hates it when anybody misses school."

"She won't scold. I'll tell her myself. Come on, show your tongue."

The grandfather carefully examined the boy's tongue and throat. For a long time he tried to find his pulse. Callused and rough from years of hard work, the old man's fingers managed miraculously to catch the heartbeats in the boy's hot, sweaty wrist. Then he said reassuringly:

"God is kind. You've simply caught a chill. The frost got into you. You'll stay in bed today, and at night I'll rub your feet and chest with hot mutton fat. You'll sweat it out, and, God willing, you will get up in the morning strong as a wild ass.”

As he recalled the previous day and Orozkul and all that still awaited him, Momun's face darkened. He sighed, sitting at his grandson's bed, lost in thought.

"Well, what can you do with the man?" he whispered, and turned to the boy. "When did you get sick? Why didn't you say anything? Was it last night?"

"Yes, in the evening. When I saw the deer across the river. I ran to tell you. Then I got very cold."

The old man said in a guilty voice:

"All right. . . . Lie here, I have to go."

He stood up, but the boy stopped him:

"Ate, isn't that the Horned Mother Deer herself? The one that's white as milk, with eyes like that . . . looking like a human being . . ."

"You little silly." Old Momun smiled cautiously. "Well, let it be your way. Maybe it is she," he said quietly, "the miraculous Mother Deer, who knows? I think . . ."

The old man did not finish. Grandma appeared in the door. She hurried in from the yard, she had already heard something there.

"Go out there, old man," she said from the threshold. Grandpa Momun drooped at once. He looked shrunken and pitiful. "They want to drag the log out with the truck," said the old woman. "Go and do everything they tell you . . . Oh, my God, I haven't boiled the milk yet," she recalled herself and ran to fire the stove and rattle with the dishes.

The old man frowned. He wanted to argue with her, to say something. But grandma didn't let him open his mouth.

"What are you staring at?" she shouted. "Who are you to be stubborn? What do you think we are? Who are you to stand up against them? Some people came out there to Orozkul, with a truck big enough to carry ten logs up the mountains. And Orozkul won't even look our way. I begged and pleaded, I crawled before him. He wouldn't let your daughter cross the threshold. There she sits, your barren one, at Seidakhmat's. Crying her eyes out. And cursing you, her brainless father . . ."

"That'll do," the old man lost his patience, and, turning toward the door, he said: "Give the boy some hot milk, he's sick."

"I'll give him, I'll give him, just go, go, for God's sake." And after he left, she still grumbled: "What's come over him? He never crossed anyone, always quiet as a mouse, and now —look at him. And grabs Orozkul's horse on top of it, and gallops off. It's all on your account." She shot a vicious glance at the boy. "At least, if it was somebody worth taking risks for . . ."

Then she brought the boy hot milk with yellow molten butter. The milk scalded his lips, but grandma made him drink it:

"Drink, drink, the hotter the better, don't be afraid. The only way to drive out a cold."

The boy burned his mouth, tears stood in his eyes. And grandma suddenly relented:

"All right, let it cool, let it cool a bit. . . . Picked such a time to get sick," she sighed.

The boy had long wanted to urinate. He got up, feeling a strange, sweet weakness throughout his body. But grandma stopped him:

"You want to piss?"

"Yes," the boy admitted.

"Wait, just a minute."

She brought him a basin.

Awkwardly turning away, the boy let the stream run into the basin, wondering at the urine being so hot and yellow.

He felt much better now. His head ached less. The boy lay quietly in bed, grateful for grandma's help and thinking that he must get well by morning and go to school tomorrow without fail. He also thought about how he would tell every-one at school about the three deer that had come to their forest. He would tell them that the white doe was the Horned Mother Deer herself, that she had a calf, already big and strong, and a great brown buck with huge horns; that he was powerful and guarded the Horned Mother Deer and her son from the wolves. He also thought that, if the deer remained with them and didn't go away, the Horned Mother Deer would soon bring Uncle Orozkul and Aunt Bekey the magic cradle.

In the morning the deer came down to the river. They emerged from the upper levels of the forest when the brief autumn sun was halfway up over the mountain range. The higher it rose, the brighter and warmer it became below, among the mountains. After the numb, chill night the forest came alive with the movement of light and colors.

Making their way among the trees, the deer walked unhurriedly, warming themselves in the sunny clearings, nibbling the dewy foliage on the branches. They went in the same order: first the buck, then the fawn, and last, the high- flanked doe, the Horned Mother Deer. They followed the path down which Orozkul and the old man had dragged the ill-starred pine log to the river the day before. The trace left by the log in the black earth was still fresh—a ragged furrow with scattered tufts of grass. The path led to the ford where the log had been left, caught among the rocks.

The deer walked to this spot because it was the most convenient watering place. Orozkul, Seidakhmat, and the two men who had come for the timber walked to the river to find the best way of getting the truck down to the bank, in order to get the log out with a towline. Grandpa Momun ambled

uncertainly, with bowed head, behind the others. He did not know how to conduct himself after the previous day's scandal. He did not know what to do, what to say. Would Orozkul allow him to take part in the work? Would he drive him away as he had done yesterday, when Momun was going to try and drag the log out with the horse? What if he said, "Hey, what are you doing here? Weren't you told you're fired?" What if he insulted him before strangers and sent him home? The old man was torn with doubts. He walked as to an execution, yet he walked on. Behind him was grandma, pretending that she was just going on her own, out of curiosity. But she was really keeping an eye on him. She drove Obliging Momun to seek a reconciliation with Orozkul, to win his forgiveness.

Orozkul stepped out importantly—the lord of the woods. He walked, puffing, snorting, and throwing stern glances right and left. And though his head ached from the previous night's drinking binge, he gloated vengefully. Glancing back, he saw old Momun ambling behind him like a loyal dog whipped by his master. "Wait, I'm not done with you yet. I won't even glance at you now. You're nothing to me—an empty place. I'll have you crawling at my feet," Orozkul gloated, remembering the frenzied shrieks of his wife the night before as he was kicking her, stretched on the ground before him, throwing her out of his house. "Just wait and see. I'll get these fellows with their logs out of the way, and then I'll bring the two together, let them go at one another's throats. She'll scratch her father's eyes out—she's gone berserk, like a she-wolf," Orozkul thought to himself during the breaks in the conversation with his visitor as they walked.

The man's name was Koketay. He was a dark, burly peasant, the bookkeeper from the collective farm by the lake. He had long been on friendly terms with Orozkul. About twelve years ago he had built himself a house. Orozkul had helped him with the timber, selling him logs for boards at bargain prices. Then the man had married off his older son and built a house for him as well. And again Orozkul had supplied him with logs. Now Koketay was setting up his younger son on his own, and needed more timber for construction. This time, too, his old friend Orozkul came to his aid. Life was damned difficult. You did something and hoped that now, at last, you'd have some peace for a while. But no, something else kept turning up. And a man couldn't get along nowadays without people like Orozkul.

"God willing, we'll invite you to a housewarming soon. Come, we'll have plenty of fun," Koketay was saying to Orozkul.

The other puffed smugly on his cigarette.

"Thanks. When we are asked, we don't refuse; when we're not asked, we don't invite ourselves. If you call me, I'll come. It wouldn't be the first time

I visited you. I'm just thinking—it might be best if you don't start out back till evening. Let it get darker. The main thing is to get past the Soviet farm without attracting attention. If they find out . . ."

"You're right enough." Koketay was undecided. "But it's a long wait till evening. We'll start out slowly. After all, there's no patrol post on the road to check us. Unless you accidentally run into the police or someone like that . . ."

"That's just it," mumbled Orozkul, frowning with heart-burn and headache. "You can travel a hundred times on business and never meet a dog on the road, and then you'll take some timber once in a hundred years, and you'll be sure to get into a mess. It's always that way."

They fell silent, each thinking his own thoughts. Orozkul was angry because the log had been left in the river. Otherwise, the truck could have been loaded last night and sent off at dawn, and he'd be rid of the worry. But no, they had to get in trouble! And it was all the old man's fault, with his sudden rebellion. Decided to go against authority, to have his own way. All right! He will not get away with it so easily . . .

The deer were drinking when the men came to the river at the opposite bank. Busy with their own affairs and conversations, the people did not even notice the animals across the river.

The deer stood in the reeds, red with the morning light, up to their ankles in water, on the clear, pebbled bottom. They drank in small sips, unhurriedly, stopping now and, then. The water was icy. And the sun above was getting ever warmer and more pleasant. As they quenched their thirst, the deer enjoyed the sun. The dew that had dripped abundantly upon them on the way down was drying out. A light mist rose from their backs. The morning of that day was blessed and serene.

And the people still did not notice the deer. One of them returned to the truck, the others remained on the bank. Their ears alert, the deer caught the occasional voices coming from the other bank. When the truck with the trailer appeared, they started, a shiver running down their skins. The truck clattered and roared. The deer stirred, deciding to withdraw. But the machine stopped and ceased to clatter. The animals lingered. Nevertheless, they cautiously began to move away—the people on the opposite bank were speaking too loudly and moving about too much.

The deer quietly walked up the path among the low- growing shrubs, their backs and horns appearing and disappearing over the greenery. And the people still failed to see them. And only when they started across the dry sandy stretch beyond the shrubs the people suddenly caught sight of them —

clear against the lilac-colored sand, in the bright sunlight. And they stopped short in mid-movement, with open mouths.

"Look, look at that!" Seidakhmat was the first to cry out. "Deer! Where did they come from?"

"What's all the shouting for! We saw them yesterday," Orozkul spoke indifferently. "Where from! They came, so they're here."

"Oh, oh, oh," the burly Koketay cried admiringly, so excited that he had to unbutton the collar of his shirt that seemed to have grown tight. "Such smooth ones," he ex-claimed. "Must have had plenty of food all summer."

"And the doe! Look at her stepping out," the driver echoed. "As big as a mare. First time I've seen one like her."

"And the buck! Look at those horns! How does he hold them up? And they aren't afraid of anything. Where do they come from, Orozkul?" Koketay kept asking, his little pig's eyes glinting greedily.

"Must be from the sanctuary," Orozkul replied importantly, with lordly dignity. "They came over the pass, from the other side. Sure, they are not afraid. No one to frighten them, so they're not afraid."

"If only I had a gun now!" Seidakhmat burst out suddenly. "I'll bet there's more than two hundred pounds of meat there, eh?"

Momun, who had stood timidly at the side till now, could not contain himself any longer.

"What are you saying, Seidakhmat! You're not allowed to hunt them," he said in a low voice.

Orozkul threw a sidelong, frowning glance at the old man. "You dare to talk yet!" he thought with hatred. He was tempted to curse him out so that the old man would drop on the spot, but he restrained himself. After all, there were strangers present.

"We'll do without sermons," he said with irritation, without looking at Momun. "Hunting is banned in places where they live. And they don't live in these parts, so we are not responsible for them. Is that clear?" He gave the old man a threatening look.

"It's clear," Momun answered meekly and, bowing his head, walked away to the side. Grandma stealthily gave him another tug on the sleeve.

"Can't you keep quiet," she hissed. Everybody seemed embarrassed.

They looked again at the animals ascending the steep path. The deer walked single file: the red brown buck went first, proudly carrying his great horns; next came the hornless calf; the Horned Mother Deer closed the procession. Against the bare clay of the slope the deer stood out distinctly. Every graceful movement, every step were clearly visible.

"Ah, what a picture!" the driver, a round-eyed, quiet young fellow, burst out enthusiastically. "A pity I don't have my camera—it would have been a beauty . . ."

"Never mind beauty," Orozkul broke in morosely. "No use standing here. Beauty won't fill your belly. Come on, back up the truck to the water, drive right in. Seidakhmat, take off your boots," he commanded, secretly glorying in his power. "You too," he pointed at the driver. "You'll tie the towline to the log. Get moving. There's still a lot to do."

Seidakhmat began to pull off his boots. They were a bit tight.

"What are you gaping at, go help him." Grandma poked the old man when no one was looking. "And get your boots off, too, go in with them," she ordered in a vicious whisper.

Grandpa Momun hurried over to help Seidakhmat with his boots, then he quickly pulled off his own. Meantime, Orozkul and Koketay directed the truck.

"Here, this way, this way."

"Just a bit over to the left. That's it."

"A little more."

Hearing the unfamiliar noise below, the deer quickened their steps. They glanced back anxiously, and leaped over the cliff, disappearing among the birches.

"Oh, they're gone!" Koketay cried out regretfully.

"Don't worry, they won't get away!" Orozkul boasted, guessing his thoughts and pleased with his own cleverness. "Don't leave till evening, be my guest. God himself has willed it. I'll treat you to a feast you won't forget." Orozkul roared with laughter and slapped his friend on the back. Orozkul could be genial too.

"Well, in that case, I'll go along: you're the host," the burly Koketay agreed, baring his powerful yellow teeth in a grin.

The truck was already at the river's edge, its rear wheels halfway in the water. The driver did not venture to back in any deeper. Now the towline had to be carried to the log. If it was long enough, there would be no great difficulty in freeing the log from the rocks.

The towline was made of steel—it was long and heavy, and it had to be dragged across the water to the log. The driver reluctantly began to pull off his boots, glancing at the water anxiously. He had not yet decided whether it might not be best to go in with his boots on. "Maybe it's better to go in barefoot," he thought to himself. "The water will get in over the boot tops anyway—the river's deep there, up to the hips. Then I will have to go around all day in wet boots." But then he imagined how cold the water must be. Grandpa Momun saw him hesitating and hurried over to him.

"Don't get your boots off, son," he said. "Seidakhmat and I will manage it."

"Why, no, aksakal," the driver objected, embarrassed. "You're a guest, and we are local folks. You'd better get behind the wheel," the old man insisted.

Momun and Seidakhmat pushed a stick through the roll of steel cable and dragged it over the water. The moment he stepped in, Seidakhmat yelled, "Oh-h! It's ice, not water!"

Orozkul and Koketay grinned condescendingly, urging him on:

"It's all right, go on, go on. We'll get you warm quick enough!"

And Grandpa Momun did not utter a sound. He did not even feel the icy cold. With head drawn into his shoulders, to make himself as invisible as he could, he walked with his bare feet over the slippery underwater rocks, praying to God for one thing only—to keep Orozkul from ordering him to return, from driving him away, from insulting him before strangers; to make Orozkul forgive him, stupid, miserable old man that he was.

And Orozkul said nothing. He seemed unaware of Momun's zeal. Momun did not exist for him. But in his heart he triumphed—he had broken the rebellious old man after all. "So," Orozkul grinned inwardly. "Crawled over, eh? Groveling at my feet. Ah, if only I had more power—I'd twist some bigger fellows to my will. I'd get them crawling in the dust. If only they gave me—oh, even a collective farm or a Soviet farm to manage. I'd show them how to run things. Giving people too much leeway. And then they complain there's no respect for chairmen and directors. Take some low-down shepherd, and he talks with the authorities as if he was an equal. The fools, they don't deserve their power! Is that the way to deal with people? There was a time, and not

so long ago, when heads flew, and not a peep from anybody. On the contrary, they loved you all the more, sang praises all the louder. That was a time! And now? The lowest of the low—and takes it suddenly into his head to go against you. Go on, go on, I'll see you eating dirt before you're through," Orozkul gloated, throwing an occasional sidelong glance at old Momun.

And the old man, stumbling through the icy water, dragged the cable together with Seidakhmat, content because Orozkul already seemed to have forgiven him. "Forgive me, old fool that I am, that things turned out that way," he spoke mentally to Orozkul. "I lost my temper yesterday. Galloped off to bring the boy from school. A lonely child, how can a man help pitying him? Today he did not even go to school. Caught a chill. Forget it, don't hold it against me. After all, you are no stranger to me either. You think I do not wish you and my daughter happiness? If God would grant me the blessing to hear the cry of a newborn infant from your house —yours, and my daughter's— may I not leave the spot if I would not be happy to give up my own soul to God that very moment. I swear, I'd weep with joy. If only—forgive my saying so—you wouldn't hurt my daughter. As for work—as long as I can stand up on my feet, I will do anything. Anything. Just say the word . . ."

Standing a little on the side by the river, grandma was urging on the old man with gestures and her whole body: "Do your best! You see, he has forgiven you. Do as I tell you, and everything will be all right."

The boy slept. He woke once for a moment at the sound of a shot and instantly went back to sleep. Exhausted by the previous sleepless night and by his illness, he sank into a deep and quiet sleep. And even as he slept, he felt how pleasant it was to lie in bed, stretched out freely, without being racked by chills and fever. He would have slept a long time if it had not been for grandma and Aunt Bekey. They tried to speak in low voices, but they clattered the dishes, and the boy awakened.

"Take this large bowl. And the platter," grandma whispered excitedly in the front room. "And I will bring the pail and the sieve. Oh, my back. I'm all worn out. So much work. But thank God, I'm so glad."

"Ah, eneke, I cannot tell you how glad I am. Yesterday I was ready to die. If it wasn't for Guldzhamal, I would have done myself in."

"The things she'll say!" grandma chided. "Did you take the pepper? Come on. God himself has sent a gift to celebrate your reconciliation. Come, come."

As they were leaving the house, already on the threshold, Aunt Bekey asked grandma about the boy:

"He's still sleeping?"

"Let him sleep awhile," grandma replied. "When it's ready, we'll bring him some hot soup."

The boy did not fall asleep again. From the yard came the sounds of steps and voices. Aunt Bekey laughed, and Guldzhamal and grandma laughed, answering her. There were some unfamiliar voices. "Must be the people who came last night," the boy decided. "So they're still here." The only person he could neither hear nor see was Grandpa Momun. Where was he? What was he doing?

Listening to the voices outside, the boy waited for his grandfather. He was very eager to tell him about the deer he had seen yesterday. It was almost winter. Enough hay must be left for them in the woods. Let them eat. It would be good to tame them, so they would not be afraid of people at all. Perhaps they'd come across the river right to the post, into the yard. Then he and grandpa could feed them something nice, something they liked best of all. He wondered what they liked best. He might train the fawn to follow him wherever he went. Wouldn't that be great! Perhaps he'd go to school with him, too?

The boy waited for his grandfather, but he did not come. Instead of him, Seidakhmat suddenly entered the house. He was very cheerful. He swayed on his feet, smiling to himself. And when he came nearer, the smell of alcohol struck the boy's nostrils. The boy hated that ugly, acrid smell, which re-minded him of Orozkul's cruelty, of the suffering of grandpa and Aunt Bekey. But in contrast to Orozkul, Seidakhmat became kinder and merrier when he drank. Alcohol somehow made him inoffensively silly, though he was never very bright even when sober. Whenever he was tipsy, Grandpa Momun would ask:

"What are you grinning about, like a ninny? You've gotten pickled, too?"

"Aksakal, I love you. Honest, I do, like my own father."

"A-oh, at your age . . . Other fellows drive cars and trucks, and you can't manage even your own tongue. If I was your age, I'd be a tractor driver at the very least."

"Aksakal, my commander in the army said I was no good at that. But I'm infantry, aksakal, and without infantry an army is neither here nor there . . ."

"Infantry! You are a loafer, not a soldier. And your wife . . . God has no eyes. A hundred like you aren't worth a single Guldzhamal."

"That's why we're here, aksakal—there's one of me, and one of her."

"Ah, what's the use of talking to you. Strong as an ox, and the brain of an . . ." And Grandpa Momun would shake his head hopelessly.

"M—moo, m—moo," Seidakhmat would bellow and roar with laughter.

Then, stopping in the middle of the yard, he would start up the strange song he had brought from heaven knows where:

"*From the red-red mountains*

I have come on a red stallion.

Hey, redheaded merchant, open the door,

We shall drink red wine.

"*From the rust brown mountains*

I have come on a rust brown ox.

Hey, rust brown merchant, open the door,

We shall drink rust brown wine."

And the song could go on and on without end. He would come from the mountains on a camel, a rooster, a mouse, a turtle, anything that moved. The boy liked Seidakhmat drunk even better than he liked him sober.

Therefore, when the tipsy Seidakhmat appeared in the room, the boy welcomed him with a smile.

"Hah!" Seidakhmat cried out with surprise. "And they told me you're sick. You aren't sick at all. So why aren't you out in the yard? That won't do, it won't do at all."

He flung himself upon the bed. His breath heavy with alcohol, his hands and clothing giving off the smell of raw fresh meat, he began to shake the boy and kiss him. The rough stubble on his cheeks scraped the boy's face.

"Stop it, Uncle Seidakhmat," the boy begged. "Where is grandpa? Did you see him?"

"Your grandpa's out there—I mean . . ." Seidakhmat waved his hand in the air. "We . . . oh, we dragged the log out of the water. So we took a drink to warm up. And now he's . . . you know, he's cooking the meat. Get up. Come

on, get dressed—and let's go. It isn't right! We're all there, and you are here alone."

"Grandpa said I wasn't to get up," said the boy.

"Forget what he said. Come on, let's take a look. Such things don't happen every day. Today we've got a feast. The bowl is fat, the spoon is fat, and the mouth is fat! Get up!"

With drunken clumsiness he began to dress the boy.

"I'll do it myself." The boy tried to push him aside. At-tacks of dizziness came over him. But the drunk Seidakhmat would not listen. He felt he was doing a good deed, since the boy had been abandoned at home, and this was a day when the bowl was fat, and the spoon was fat, and the mouth was fat. . . .

Unsteadily, the boy followed Seidakhmat out of the house. The day in the mountains was windy. Clouds scudded fast across the sky. And while the boy was crossing the porch, the weather changed abruptly twice—from intolerably bright sunlight to unpleasant murky gray. The boy felt that this gave him a headache. Driven by a gust of wind, the smoke from the burning fire struck his face. His eyes burned. "They must be doing the laundry today," thought the boy, because on big laundry days a fire was made in the yard to boil water in the huge black cauldron for all three households. No one could pick up the cauldron alone. Aunt Bekey and Guldzhamal usually lifted it together.

The boy liked big laundry days. To begin with, there was the fire in the huge open hearth—you could play around it, not as in the house. Secondly, it was very interesting to hang out the wash. The white, blue, and red things on the line made the yard festive. The boy also liked to steal up to the clothes on the line and press his cheek to the damp fabric.

This time there was no wash in the yard. And the fire on the hearth was very big. Thick steam rose from the boiling cauldron, filled to the brim with large chunks of meat. The meat was almost ready; its smell and the smell of the fire tickled the nose and made the mouth water. Aunt Bekey in a new red dress, new leather boots, and a flowered kerchief that slipped off on her shoulders, was bending over the cauldron, removing the foam with a ladle, and Grandpa Momun stood near her on his knees, turning the flaming logs in the hearth.

"There he is, your grandpa," Seidakhmat said to the boy. "Come on."

And he began his song:

"*From the red-red mountains*

I have come on a red stallion . . ."

At that moment Orozkul looked out of the barn door, with a shaven head, with an ax in his hands and rolled-up sleeves.

"Where did you disappear to?" he shouted angrily to Seidakhmat. "Our guest is chopping wood"—he nodded at the driver—"and you sing songs."

"Oh, that won't take a moment," Seidakhmat reassured him, walking toward the driver. "Come on, brother, I'll do it."

The boy approached his grandfather, who was kneeling by the fire. He went up to him from behind.

"Ata," he said.

The old man did not hear him.

"Ata," the boy repeated, touching him on the shoulder. The old man glanced back, and the boy did not recognize him. Grandpa was drunk. The boy could not remember when he had seen him even tipsy. If it ever happened, it could only have been at some wake for one of the Issyk-Kul old men, where vodka is served to everyone, even the women. But just like that, for no reason—this had never happened before.

The old man turned to the boy with a strange, wild, re- remote look. His face was red and hot, and when he recognized his grandson, it turned still redder. It flushed and immediately turned pale. Grandpa hurriedly rose to his feet.

"What is it, eh?" he said hoarsely, pressing the boy to himself. "What is it, eh? What is it?" He seemed unable to say any other word, as though he had lost the power of speech. His agitation communicated itself to the boy.

"Are you sick, ata?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no, it's nothing," Grandpa Momun muttered. "Go, go, walk about a little. I've got to . . . I'll look after the wood . . . I . . ."

He almost pushed the boy away from himself. As though turning his back on the whole world, he knelt again before the hearth, never glancing around, absorbed only in himself and in the fire. The old man did not see his grandson shift from foot to foot with a lost look, then go toward Seidakhmat, who was chopping wood.

The boy could not understand what had come over his grandfather or what was happening in the yard. And only as he drew nearer to the barn did he notice a large mound of red fresh meat, piled on a skin spread hair down on the ground. Along the edges of the skin, blood still ran down in pale trickles. A bit farther away, on the garbage heap, the dog growled, tearing at some entrails. A dark-faced stranger, huge as a rock, squatted beside the mound of meat. It was Koketay. He and Orozkul, armed with knives, were cutting the meat into pieces, calmly, unhurriedly, throwing the dismembered parts into different places on the outstretched skin.

"What a pleasure! What a smell!" the dark, huge man was saying in a deep voice, sniffing the meat.

"Take it, take it, throw it in your pile," Orozkul urged generously. "God gave us from his herd on the day of your arrival. It doesn't happen every day."

Orozkul puffed breathlessly, getting up now and then, stroking his full belly, as though he had overeaten. And it could be seen at once that he had already taken a good share of drinks. He grunted hoarsely, raising his head to catch his breath. His face, meaty as a cow's udder, shone with well-fed self-congratulation.

The boy turned numb, as if a chill wind froze him to the spot, when he caught sight of a horned deer's head by the barn wall. The severed head lay in the dust, stained dark with blood. It looked like an uprooted stump kicked off the road. Near the head, carelessly flung down, were four hooved feet, chopped off at the knee.

The boy stared horrified at the grim sight. He could not believe his eyes. Before him lay the head of the Horned Mother Deer. He wanted to run, but his feet refused to obey him. He stood and looked at the mutilated, dead head of the white doe. The one who had just yesterday been the Horned Mother Deer, who looked at him from the other bank with kind, intent eyes, with whom he had spoken mentally and pleaded for a magic cradle with the silver bell. All this had suddenly been turned into a shapeless mass of meat, a torn skin, severed legs, and a discarded head.

He should have gone, but he stood, petrified, unable to understand how and why this had happened. The huge dark man who was dressing the meat lifted up a kidney from his pile with the tip of his knife and held it out to the boy.

"Here, boy, roast it in the coals, you'll have a tasty piece," he said.

The boy did not stir."Take it!" Orozkul commanded.

The boy stretched out his hand unfeelingly and stood clutching the delicate, still-warm kidney of the Horned Mother Deer in his cold palm. And Orozkul had in the meantime lifted up the head of the white doe by the horns.

"Huh, heavy." He weighed it in his hand. "The horns alone must weigh God knows how much."

He leaned the head sideways against a log, picked up an ax, and began to chop the horns out of the skull.

"What horns!" he kept repeating, crashing his ax into the skull. "That's for your grandpa." He winked at the boy. "When he dies, we'll set the horns on his grave. And don't let anybody say we don't respect him. What more could he ask? For such a pair of horns a man ought to be glad to die this very day." He roared with laughter, aiming his ax.

But the horns would not yield. It turned out that it wasn't so simple to chop them out. The drunken Orozkul missed his aim, and this infuriated him. The head rolled off the log, and Orozkul began to chop it on the ground. The head jumped away, and he chased it with the ax.

The boy started and recoiled at each new blow, but he could not force himself to leave. As in a nightmare, held to the spot by some dreadful, unknown power, he stood and wondered that the glassy, unblinking eye of the Horned Mother Deer did not try to save itself from the ax. It would not blink, it would not close with fear. The head had long turned gray with filth and dust, but the eye remained clear and seemed to look out at the world with the same mute astonishment as at the moment when death had found it. The boy was terrified that the drunken Orozkul might strike the eye.

And the horns still resisted. Orozkul was now altogether beside himself. In blind rage, he no longer aimed, but struck the head wherever the blow would fall—both with the butt end and the sharp edge of the ax.

"You'll break the horns that way. Let me do it." Seidakhmat came over.

"Get away! I'll do it myself! Break them—hell!" Orozkul wheezed, swinging the ax.

"As you wish." Seidakhmat spat down on the ground and went toward his house. He was followed by the huge, dark man, dragging his share of the meat in a sack.

And Orozkul, with drunken obstinacy, continued to rain blow after blow on the head of the Horned Mother Deer by the barn wall. One might have thought that he was wreaking on it a long-awaited revenge.

"You rotten scum! You damned bitch!" He kicked the head with his boot as if the dead ears could hear him. "Oh, no, you will not have it your way!" And he rushed at it again and again with the ax. "May I not leave the spot if I don't get you. There! There!" He hammered at it. The skull cracked, and pieces flew in all directions.

The boy cried out sharply when the ax struck right across the eye. A dark, thick fluid poured out of the broken eye socket. The eye died, disappeared. . . .

"I can smash bigger heads than yours! I'll twist out bigger horns!" Orozkul roared in a fit of savage fury and hatred for the innocent head.

At last he succeeded in crushing the crown and the forehead. He threw away the ax. Seizing the horns with both hands and pressing the head down with his boot, he gave the horns a brutal twist with all his strength. The horns began to give way, crunching like roots being torn from the earth.

Those were the horns on which the Horned Mother Deer was going to bring Orozkul and Aunt Bekey the magic cradle . . .

The boy felt sick. He turned, dropped the kidney, and slowly walked away. He was terribly afraid that he might fall or vomit right there, before all those people. Pale, with cold, sticky sweat on his forehead, he stumbled past the blazing hearth over which the cauldron still sent up hot steam and by which, his back to everyone, the miserable old Momun still sat with his face to the fire. The boy did not trouble the old man. All he wanted was to get into his bed as quickly as he could, lie down, and pull the blanket up over his head. Not to see or hear anything. To forget.

Aunt Bekey happened to cross his path. Incongruously dressed up, but with the black-and-blue bruises from Orozkul's blows still on her face, thin as a rail and inappropriately gay, she rushed around all day preparing the ``big feast."

"What is the matter with you?" she asked the boy.

"My head hurts," he said.

"Oh, my poor darling," she said in a sudden access of tenderness, and began to shower him with kisses.

She, too, was drunk. She, too, smelled sickeningly of vodka.

"His head hurts," she mumbled sympathetically. "My lamb. You must be hungry."

"No, I am not. I want to lie down."

"Come, then, come, you'll lie down at my house. Why should you be all by yourself—everybody's coming to us. The guests, and our own people."

And she dragged him off. When they were passing the hearth again, Orozkul appeared from behind the barn, sweaty and red as an inflamed udder. Triumphantly, he threw the deer's horns he had chopped off next to Grandpa Momun. The old man rose a little from his crouching position.

Without looking at him, Orozkul lifted a pail of water and began to gulp, spilling the water over himself.

"You can die now," he flung at the old man, and began to drink again, the water pouring down all over him. The boy heard grandpa mumble:

"Thanks, son, thanks. Now death's no longer frightening. Naturally. I have honor and respect, so why . . ." "I'll go home," said the boy, overcome with dizziness. But Aunt Bekey would not hear of it.

"No use your being all alone there." And almost by force she led him into her house and laid him down in the corner on the bed.

In the house everything was ready for the feast. Everything was cooked, roasted, baked. Grandma and Guldzhamal were busily arranging it all. Aunt Bekey rushed back and forth between the house and the hearth in the yard. While they waited for the main course, Orozkul and the huge dark man treated themselves to tea, half-reclining on colored blankets, their elbows resting on cushions. They had suddenly become very important in their bearing—they felt like princes. Seidakhmat poured the tea into their cups.

And the boy lay quietly in the corner, every muscle tied and tense. He was shaken by chills. He wanted to get up and go, but was afraid that he would retch the moment he got out of bed. And therefore he suppressed the lump stuck in his throat, afraid to make the slightest move.

The women soon called Seidakhmat into the yard, and he reappeared in the door with a mound of steaming meat in an enormous enameled bowl. He carried it with difficulty and set it down before Orozkul and Koketay. The women followed him with a variety of dishes.

Everybody began to settle down, preparing knives and plates. Meantime, Seidaktimat poured vodka in the glasses.

"I will be the vodka commander," he guffawed, nodding at the bottles in the corner.

The last to come in was Grandpa Momun. The old man looked strange, even more pitiful than ever. He wanted to sit down somewhere at the side, but the dark, huge Koketay generously invited him to sit down next to him.

"Come this way, aksakal."

"Thank you. I'll sit here, I'm not a guest here, after all." Momun tried to refuse.

"Oh, no, you are the eldest," Koketay insisted, and seated him between himself and Seidakhmat. "Let's have a drink, aksakal, in honor of your marvelous success. You have the first word."

Grandpa Momun cleared his throat uncertainly.

"To peace in this home," he said with difficulty. "And where there's peace, there's also happiness, my children."

"Right, right!" everybody echoed, turning the glasses bottoms up.

"But what about you? No, no, that will not do! You toast to the happiness of your daughter and your son-in-law and then don't drink yourself," Koketay reproached the embarrassed Momun.

"Well, if it's to happiness, sure . . ." he mumbled hurriedly. And, to everyone's surprise, he gulped down almost a full glass in a single breath. Then, stunned, he shook his old head.

"That's the way!"

"Our old man is quite something, you won't find another like him!"

"Your old man is all right!"

Everybody laughed, everybody was pleased and praised grandpa.

The house became hot and stifling. The boy lay in torment, gripped with nausea. He lay with eyes closed and heard the drunken people chomping, gnawing, puffing, as they devoured the flesh of the Horned Mother Deer. He heard them offering each other tasty tidbits, clinking their greasy glasses, throwing the gnawed bones into a bowl.

"Not venison—foal's meat!" Koketay praised the food, smacking his lips.

"You think we're fools—living in the woods without eating such meat?" said Orozkul.

"Right, that's why we live here," echoed Seidakhrnat.

Everybody praised the meat of the Horned Mother Deer. Grandma, Aunt Bekey, Guldzhamal, and even Grandpa Momun piled plates for the boy and shoved them at him. But he refused, until, seeing that he was sick, they left him alone.

The boy lay with clenched teeth. It seemed to him that this would make it easier to contain the nausea. But he was tormented most of all by the awareness of his own helplessness, his inability to do anything to these people who had killed the Horned Mother Deer. And in his just childish rage and despair, the boy invented all sorts of revenge—to punish them, to force them to realize what a dreadful crime they had committed. But he could think of nothing better than calling silently to Kulubek to help him. The fellow in the army coat who had come into the mountains with the other young drivers for hay on that stormy night. He was the only man the boy knew who could get the better of Orozkul, who could tell him the whole truth without fear.

At the boy's call, Kulubek came speeding in his truck and jumped out of the cabin with his gun on the ready: "Where are they?" "There!" They ran together to Orozkul's house and pulled the door open: "Don't move! Hands up!" Kulubek cried menacingly from the threshold, aiming his submachine gun. Everybody was stunned. They froze with panic in their seats. The food stuck in their throats. With chunks of meat in their greasy hands, with greasy cheeks and lips, stuffed, drunken, they could not even stir.

"Get up, vermin!" Kulubek held the muzzle of the gun against Orozkul's temple. And Orozkul went into a shaking fit and fell on his knees before Kulubek, stuttering: "Ha-ha- have p-pity, d-d-don't k-k-kill me!" But Kulubek was implacable. "Get out, vermin! This is the end of you!" With a strong kick at the fat behind, he compelled Orozkul to get up and go out of the house. And everybody else, terrified and silent, went out.

"Stand up against the wall!" Kulubek ordered Orozkul. "For killing the Horned Mother Deer, for chopping out her horns, on which she carried the cradle, you are sentenced to death!" Orozkul crawled in the dust, whining, moaning: "Don't kill me, I haven't even any children. I am alone in the whole world. I've neither son, nor daughter . . ."

Whatever has become of his haughty dignity? A wretched, miserable coward. Not even worth killing.

"All right," the boy said to Kulubek. "We won't kill him. But let this man go from here and never come back. We do not need him here. Let him leave."

Orozkul stood up, pulled up his trousers, and, afraid to glance back, ran away at a quick trot—fat, puffy, with sagging trousers. But Kulubek stopped him: "Wait! We'll say to you one final word. You will never have any children.

You are an evil and worthless man. Nobody and nothing loves you. The forest doesn't love you, not a single tree, not even a single blade of grass has any love for you. You are a fascist. Go from here—forever. Double quick!" Orozkul ran off without a backward glance. "Schnell, schnell!" Kulubek laughed after him, and fired into the air to scare him.

The boy laughed and rejoiced. And after Orozkul had disappeared from sight, Kulubek said to all the others, who huddled guiltily before the door: "How is it that you've lived with such a man? Aren't you ashamed?"

The boy felt a sense of relief. Justice had been done. And his fancy seemed so real that he forgot entirely where he was, forgot the reason for the drunken feast in Orozkul's house.

A burst of laughter recalled him from this blessed state. The boy opened his eyes and listened. Grandpa Momun was not in the room. He had evidently stepped out somewhere. The women were clearing the dishes, preparing to serve tea. Seidakhmat was loudly telling some story. The others laughed at his words.

"And what happened then?"

"Go on!"

"No, just tell it again," Orozkul begged, rolling with laughter. "How you said to him—you know . . . How you scared him. Oh, I'll burst!"

"Well, you see," Seidakhmat repeated willingly, "we were riding up to the deer, and they stood at the edge of the woods, all three of them. We tied the horses to trees, when the old man suddenly grabs my hand: 'We cannot shoot deer,' he says. 'We're Bugans, children of the Horned Mother Deer!'

And looks at me like a child, begging with his eyes. And I think—another minute, and I'll burst out laughing. But I didn't. No, I told him with a straight face: 'What's the matter with you? Do you want to end your days in prison?' `No,' he says. 'And don't you know,' I say to him, 'that those are fairy tales invented in the ignorant old times when we were ruled by beys, just to keep down the poor people, to keep them scared?' And his mouth just drops open: 'What are you saying!' 'Now, then,' I told him, 'better forget that nonsense. I don't care if you're an old man, I'll write a letter about you to the right authorities.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!" his listeners roared, and Orozkul laughed more than anybody else, savoring every bit of the story.

"Well, then, we stole up to them. Another animal would have beat it long ago, but those crazy deer didn't even think of running. They weren't

afraid of us at all. All the better, I think to myself," the drunken Seidakhmat boasted. "I went ahead with the gun, the old man behind me. And then I suddenly began to wonder. I'd never even shot a sparrow in my life. And now this business. If I missed, they would take off, then try and chase them in the woods. They'd swing across the pass, and good-bye to the meat. Who wants to take a chance with such game? And our old man here is a hunter, he's gotten even bears in his day. So I say to him, 'Here, take the gun, old man, and shoot.' But he wouldn't touch it, no, no. 'Do it yourself,' he says. 'But I am drunk,' I tell him, and begin to stagger on my feet, as if I couldn't stand up. He'd seen me share a bottle with you after we got the log out, so I pretended I was drunk."

"Ha, ha, ha . . ."

"'I'll miss,' I said to him. The deer will get away and won't come back again. And we cannot return empty-handed, you know that. You'd better look out. Why do you think they sent us here?' He wouldn't say a word, and wouldn't touch the gun. 'Oh, well,' I say, `do as you wish.' I threw down the gun and started walking away. He came behind me. So I say to him, 'I don't care. If Orozkul kicks me out, I'll go to work in the Soviet farm. But what will you do, at your age?' He kept quiet. And then I started up, just to complete the picture, you know:

"'*From the red-red mountains*

I have come on a red stallion.

Hey, redheaded merchant, open the door. . .”

"Ha, laa, ha . . ."

"Then he believed that I was really drunk. He went back for the gun. I went back too. While we were arguing, the deer moved off a little. 'Well,' I say, 'look out now. If they escape, you'll never catch them. Shoot before they get scared.' The old man took the gun. We started stealing up. And he kept whispering like a crazy one: 'Forgive me, Horned Mother Deer, forgive me . . .' And I kept saying, 'Look out, now. If you botch it, you can take off after the deer, wherever your legs will carry you, but don't come back.'"

"Ha, ha, ha . . ."

Amid the drunken fumes and laughter the boy felt he was burning hot and suffocating. His head was splitting with a swelling pain too large for his skull. It seemed to him that somebody was kicking him in the head, that somebody was chopping his head with an ax. It seemed to him that somebody was aiming an ax at his eye, and he turned and twisted his head, trying to escape the blow. Fainting with heat, he suddenly found himself in

the cold, cold river. He had turned into a fish. Tail, body, fins—everything was fishlike, except the head, which was his own and still ached. He swam through the muted, cool, underwater darkness and thought that now he would remain a fish forever and never go back to the mountains. "I won't return," he said to himself. "It's better to be a fish, it's better to be a fish . . ."

And no one noticed when the boy slipped out of the bed and left the house. He had barely reached the corner when he started vomiting. Grasping at the wall, the boy moaned and wept; suffocating with sobs, tears running down his face, he muttered:

"No, I'd rather be a fish. I'll swim away from here. I'll be a fish."

And in Orozkul's house drunken voices hooted and shouted with laughter. This wild laughter deafened the boy, causing him intolerable pain and anguish. It seemed to him that he was so sick because he was listening to that monstrous laughter. When he had caught his breath, he started to cross the yard. Now it was dark and empty. By the extinguished hearth, the boy stumbled on Grandpa Momun, dead drunk. The old man lay there next to the chopped-out horns of the Horned Mother Deer. The dog gnawed at a piece of the deer's head. No one else was there.

The boy wandered off. He went down to the river and stepped into the water. Hurrying, slipping and falling, he ran down the sloping bottom, shivering from the icy spray, and when he reached the main current, it knocked him off his feet. Floundering in the rushing stream, he began to swim, gagging and freezing.

The boy swam down the river, now on his back, now face down, now slowing up near rocky shoals, now sweeping down the rapids . . .

No one knew as yet that the boy had floated down the river as a fish. A drunken song rose in the yard:

"*From the humpy, humpy mountains*

I have come on a humpy camel.

Hey, humpbacked merchant, open the door, We shall drink bitter wine . . ."

But you no longer heard the song. You had gone away, my boy, into your tale. Did you know that you would never turn into a fish, that you would never reach Issyk-Kul, or see the white ship, or say to it: "Hello, white ship, it's I"?

You swam away.

There's only one thing I can say now: you rejected what your child's soul was unable to make peace with. And that is my consolation. Your life was like a flash of lightning that gleamed once and went out. And lightning is born of the sky. And the sky is eternal. And that is my consolation. And also, that the child's conscience in man is like the bud in a seed; without the bud the seed will not grow. And whatever awaits us in the world, truth shall abide forever, as long as men are born and die . . .

And so, in parting, I repeat your words, boy: "Hello, white ship, it's I!"