atop all the mountains and above the whole earth. And the mountains lower than the snowy giants—the thickly forested ones, covered down below with leafy thickets and above with stands of dark pine. And the mountains of Kungei, which rose up towards the sun; on the Kungei slopes, nothing grew but grass. And the still smaller mountains towards the lake, which were no more than naked, rocky knolls left after landslides. The knolls descended into the valley, and the valley narrowed directly down into the lake. On the same side lay fields, orchards and settlements . . . Yellow zigzags already showed through the green of the sown areas: harvest time was approaching. Tiny lorries crept along the roads like mice, followed by long trails of whirling dust. At the farthest corner of the earth, as far as you could see, beyond the sandy strip of shore was the deep blue of the lake's convex curvature. This was the Issik-Kul. Water and sky joined together there. Beyond that, there was nothing. The lake was immobile, dazzling and vacant. Only near the bank stirred the barely-visible white foam of the surf.

The lad gazed in this direction for a long time. "The white steamship hasn't come yet," he said to the briefcase. "Let's you and I have another look at our school."

From here, the entire neighbouring valley beyond the mountain was visible. Through the binoculars, you could even make out the yarn in the hands of the old women who were sitting outside their houses, under the windows.

The Jelesai Valley was bare of forest; only a few lonely old pine trees remained here and there after its cutting long ago. Once there had been a forest here. Now there were rows of cattle pens under slate roofs, and you could see big black piles of manure and straw. Young pedigree animals for the dairy were raised there. And there too, not far from the cattle pens, a stunted little street found room for itself—the cattle breeders' settlement. The little street ran down from a small hillock. At

the very edge of the street, its far end, stood a little house with an uninhabited appearance. This was the four-year primary school. The pupils in older classes went off to study in a boarding school on the state farm. But the little children went to this one.

The lad had visited the settlement with grandfather to go to the village medical assistant when he'd had a sore throat. Now, through the binoculars, he examined the little school intensely under its brownish tiles, with its single ramshackle chimney and its hand-painted sign on a plywood rectangle: 'Mektep'. He couldn't read, but guessed that this was the word that was written. Through the binoculars, everything was visible in the tiniest, unbelievably fine detail. Words of some kind scratched into the mortar walls, a glued-together pane in one of the window frames, the stooped, pock-marked panels of the veranda. He pictured how he would come here with his briefcase and march through that door, on which a large padlock now hung. But what was there, what would happen there, behind that door?

Completing his examination of the school, the lad again directed the binoculars to the lake. But nothing had changed there. The white steamship still hadn't appeared. The lad turned around, settled with his back to the lake and, putting aside the binoculars, began to look downward, below the mountain. Below, directly under the mountain, along the bottom of the elongated hollow, ran the silvery, violent river with its dozens of rapids. Following its bank, the road twisted with the river—then, together with the river, hid itself behind a veer in the gorge. The opposite bank was steep and forested. This was the beginning of the San-Tash forest preserve, rising high up into the mountains until it reached the snow itself. The pine trees grew higher than any others. Amidst the rocks and snow, they stuck up like black brushes on the crests of the mountain chains.

The lad mockingly surveyed the houses, sheds and outhouses in the yards of the cordon. They seemed tiny and fragile from above. Beyond the cordon, farther down the bank, he picked out his own, familiar rocks. He had first distinguished all of them—'camel', 'wolf', 'saddle', 'tank'—from this spot on Guard Mountain through the binoculars. That was when he gave them their names.

The lad smiled mischievously, stood and flung a stone in the direction of his house. But the stone landed right there, just a little way down the mountain. The lad sat down again in the same place and began surveying the cordon through the binoculars. First through the large lenses into the smaller ones—the houses flew away far into the distance, and turned into little toy boxes. The boulders became pebbles. And grandfather's pond in the shallow of the river seemed even funnier—a drop in the bucket. The lad grinned, shook his head, and quickly shifting the binoculars right way round, adjusted the oculars. His cherished boulders, enlarged to huge proportions, seemed to be resting their foreheads against the lenses. 'Camel', 'wolf', 'saddle' and 'tank' were extremely impressive: they had notches, cracks and spots of rusty lichen on their sides—and most important, they really looked very much like what the lad saw in them. "Gee, what a wolf! And the tank—he's really something . . ."

Beyond the rocks lay grandfather's pond in the shallow. You could see this part of the bank very clearly through the binoculars. Here the water streamed over the wide, pebbly shallows from the rapids, and surging up over the shoals, ran back into the main stream. The water in the shallow came up to the knees, but the current was so strong that it could easily wash a boy like him straight into the river. So as not to be carried off by the current, the lad would hold on to a rose willow on the bank—the bush grew on the very edge of the bank, with some of its branches on dry land and others

wriggling in the river—and dipped into the water. What kind of swimming do you call that? Like a horse on a tether. And how many other troubles there were—how he was scolded and cursed! Old grandma would lecture grandfather: "If he's washed away, he can take all the blame on himself, I'm not going to lift a finger. Who needs him anyway? His own mother and father abandoned him. And I've got worries enough of my own, I've come to the end of my strength."

What could you say to her? The old woman was right in a way. Still, it was a pity for the boy not to swim: after all, the river was right there, almost at his door. No matter how the old woman tried to fill him with fear, the boy kept ducking into the water all the same. That was when Momun finally decided to build a pond out of rocks on the sand bank, so that the little tyke would have a safe place to swim.

How many rocks old man Momun shifted to the river, having picked out the larger ones so that the current wouldn't roll them away. He carried the rocks over by pressing them against his stomach; then, standing in the water, he laid one upon another with the calculation that the water should flow freely between the rocks on one side, and escape just as freely on the other. Funny-looking, skinny, with his scraggy little beard, he worked fastidiously a whole day over the pond, in wet trousers clinging to his body. In the evening, he lay flat on his back, coughed, and found himself unable to straighten the small of his back. At this point, old grandma yielded wholly to her scorn.

"The little one's a fool—but he's only little. What can you say about an old fool? Why the devil did you knock yourself up that way? You feed him, clothe him—what else does he need? You hippety-hop to his every little whim. Ekh, nothing good will come of it . . ."

Despite all this, the pond on the shallow turned out very well indeed. Now the lad bathed without fear. Holding on to

the branch, he climbed down from the bank and plunged into the stream. Invariably with his eyes open. Open eyes because fish in water swim with them open. That was his curious daydream: he wanted to turn into a fish. And to swim away.

Gazing now at the pond through the binoculars, the lad pictured how he would rip off his shirt and trousers and, naked and huddled up, slip into the water. The water in mountain rivers is always very cold; it takes your breath away. But then you get used to it. He pictured how, holding on to a branch of the rose willow, he always plunged face first into the stream. How the water would gurgle up over his head noisily, and the tingling scurry up his stomach, back and legs. Underwater, the noises of the outside world died away, leaving only a babbling in his ears. Goggling zealously, he would examine everything visible underwater. His eyes would smart. He'd feel a stinging in his eyes. But he'd smile to himself haughtily and even stick out his tongue in the water. That would be for old grandma. Let her learn that he'd never drown and didn't fear a thing. Then he'd let go of the branch and the water would carry him away, pull him downstream until he could plant his feet on the rocks around the pond. At this point, his breath would give out. He'd jump out of the water in a single leap, climb up on the bank and dash over to the rose willow bush again. And keep at this over and over. He was ready to swim a hundred times a day in grandfather's pond. Until he finally turned into a fish. No matter how, he had to turn into a fish, he absolutely *must* . . .

Having scrutinised the river bank, the lad shifted the binoculars to his own yard. Chickens, turkeys and turkey-poults, an axe leaning against a block, a smoking samovar and all kinds of stuff cluttered around the house—all these things became so unbelievably big and seemed so close that the lad involuntarily reached out his hand to them. At this moment, to his great horror, he saw a brownish calf in the binoculars,

enlarged to elephantine proportions. He was peacefully chewing at the laundry hung out on a line. The calf's eyes were screwed up with pleasure and saliva dripped from its muzzle—how wonderful it was to munch a whole mouthful of old grandma's dress.

"Hey you—you idiot!" The lad jumped up with the binoculars and began to wave his hand. "Get out of there this minute, do you hear? Move yourself—clear off! Baltek, *Baltek!*" (Framed in the lenses, the dog was stretched out alongside the house, dead to the world.) "Go for him, get at him," he commanded the dog in despair. But Baltek did not so much as prick an ear. He lay in the shade as if nothing was happening and nothing ever would.

At this moment, old grandma emerged from the house. When she saw the disaster, the old woman threw up her hands. Then grabbed a broom and fell upon the calf. The calf ran away, with old grandma in hot pursuit. Not losing her for an instant in the binoculars, the lad squatted down again so as not to be seen on the mountain. Having driven off the calf, the old woman made her way back towards the house, cursing and panting from exertion and anger. The lad saw her as if he were right there at her side—even closer. He held a close-up on her in his lenses, as in the cinema when the whole screen is somebody's face. He saw her yellowed eyes, now narrowed in fury. He watched her whole face, wrinkled into deep creases, going a deep red. As in the cinema when the sound suddenly goes off, old grandma's lips twitched in quick and soundless motion, revealing her chipped teeth, few and far between.

From afar, you couldn't make out what the old woman was shouting, but the boy felt her words so distinctly and precisely that she might have been speaking right into his ear. Zounds, how she was cursing him! He knew it all by heart: "All right, just you wait. You'll come back. I'll show you. And I won't pay

any attention to grandfather. How many times have I said it: those fool look-glasses should be tossed out once and for all. He's sneaked off to the mountain—yes, again. I hope it drops to hell, that damn steamship. I hope it burns down, I hope it sinks . . ."

The boy on the mountain sighed deeply. Just on the day when his briefcase was bought, when he was already dreaming about how he'd go to school, it had to go and happen that he'd forget the calf . . .

The old woman did not regain her composure. Maintaining a steady stream of cursing, she examined her chewed-up dress. With her daughter in her arms, Guljamal went out to give her comfort and calm her down. But in the process of complaining to her, old grandma succumbed even more to her rage. She shook her fists in the direction of the mountain. Her dark bony fists loomed up threateningly in the lenses. "He's cooked up a fine way to play for himself. I hope it drops to hell, that damn steamship. I hope it burns down, I hope it sinks . . ."

The samovar in the yard was already boiling. Through the binoculars, you could see a jet of steam escaping from under the lid. Aunt Bekai came out to attend to it. Which started everything all over again. Old grandma shoved the munched-up dress almost into her nose as if to say, here, take a good look at your nephew's tricks.

Aunt Bekai began to reason with her in an attempt to soothe her anger. The lad guessed what she was saying: just about what she always did. "Calm yourself, *Eneke.** He's still young, just a silly little kid—you can't expect much from him. He's alone here, he has no friends. Why shout, what's the use of building fear in the boy?"

To which old grandma doubtlessly replied: "Don't you tell me how to behave. Try to bear some children of your own

* *Eneke:* the Kirghiz equivalent of the Russian *matushka:* roughly 'dear, sweet, respected, old mother'.

and then you'll know what to expect from them. What's he hanging around there on the mountain for? Too busy with his nonsense to tie up the calf. What's he up there spying at? Looking out for his good-for-nothing parents? The ones who scattered to the winds the minute they gave birth to him? It's easy for you to talk, you barren thing . . ."

Even at that distance, the lad saw Aunt Bekai's sunken cheeks turn a deathly pale through the binoculars. He watched her whole body begin to throb and—he knew exactly how his aunt would pay her back—saw her blurt fierce words into her step-mother's face.

"What about you, you old witch—how many sons did *you* raise—or daughters? Who the hell do you think you are?"

And oh, what now began. Old grandma howled in outrage. Guljamal tried to reconcile the women; she talked soothingly to them, hugged old grandma and tried to lead her back into her house. But the latter became more and more incensed, scuttling around the yard as if mad. Aunt Bekai seized the samovar and fairly ran back home with it, spilling some of the boiling water. Old grandma sunk wearily onto the chopping block, sobbing and bitterly bemoaning her fate. Now the lad was forgotten; the culprits were none other than the Lord God himself and the whole wide world.

"You mean *me*? You asked me who *I* am?" screamed old grandma at her departed step-daughter. "If God hadn't punished me, if he hadn't taken my five babies, if my son, my one and only, didn't meet a bullet during the war at eighteen, if my dear, darling man Taigara hadn't frozen to death with a flock of sheep in a terrible snowstorm—do you really think I'd be here, among you forest types? Do you really think I'm anything like you, you dead-wombed creature? Do you really think I'd live out my old age with your father, that imbecile Momun? Cursed God, what faults and sins did you punish me for?"

The lad removed the binoculars from his eyes and sadly hung his head. "How can we go home now?" he said softly to the briefcase. "All this happened because of me and that idiot calf. And because of you too, binoculars. You're always inviting me to look at the white steamship. You're guilty too."

The lad looked around in all directions. Everywhere were mountains, cliffs, rocks and forests. Glittering streams flew down silently from glaciers above. Only here, down below, did the water seem to acquire a voice—to produce its incessant, eternal sounds in the river. The mountains were vast and limitless. At this moment, the boy felt very small, entirely alone and wholly lost. Alone with the mountains, everywhere the great mountains.

The sun was already starting its descent towards the lake. The heat was becoming less powerful. The first short shadows were appearing on the eastern slopes. Now the sun would sink lower and lower, and the shadows would creep down to the foot of the mountains. At this time of day, the white steamship usually appeared on the Issik-Kul.

The lad directed the binoculars to the farthest visible point and held his breath. There it was! Everything was immediately forgotten: there, in the distance, on the bluest of blue edge of the Issik-Kul, the white steamship appeared. It was underway. There it was! Long, powerful and beautiful, with its funnels all in a row. It travelled straight and smooth, as if on a string. The lad hurriedly wiped the lenses with his shirt-tail and again adjusted the oculars. The ship's outlines became even clearer. Now you could see it rolling gently on the waves, and how its stern left a light trail of foam. Motionless, the lad watched the white steamship in rapture. Had it been in his power, he would have begged the white steamship to come closer, so that he could see the people on board. But the steamship knew nothing of this. It moved along its own course slowly and

majestically, from an unknown origin to an unknown destination.

For a long time, the ship could be seen steaming on; for a long time, the lad thought about how he'd turn into a fish and swim down the river to join it, the white steamship.

When he first saw the white steamship one day on Guard Mountain, saw it there on the blue Issik-Kul, his heart chimed so from its dazzling beauty that he decided at once. His father—an Issik-Kul sailor—had to work precisely there, on the white steamship. And the lad believed this, because he very much wanted to.

He remembered neither his father nor his mother. He'd never seen them, even once. Neither of them visited him even a single time. But the lad knew: his father was a sailor on the Issik-Kul and his mother, after the divorce from his father, had left her son with his grandfather and moved to the city. She moved—meaning vanished. Moved to a distant city beyond the mountains, the lake, and yet more mountains.

Grandfather Momun once went to that city to sell potatoes. He stayed there, seeing to the selling, a whole week and when he returned, told Aunt Bekai and old grandma over tea that he had seen his daughter—that is, his, the lad's, mother. She worked as a weaver in a big factory of some sort. She had a new family: two daughters whom she put in a municipal kindergarten and saw only once a week. She lived in a large block of flats but in one tiny room, so tiny that you could hardly turn around in it. And no one knew anyone else in the yard—just like at the market. They all lived like that there: they'd come home and lock their doors straightaway. They were always under lock and key, like in jail. And her husband, who seemed to be a driver, carted people around streets in a bus. He left at four o'clock in the morning and came back late in the evening—also hard work. His daughter, Momun related, had cried a lot and begged forgiveness. They were on

the list for a new flat, but didn't know when they'd get one. But when they did, she'd take her sonny-boy back with her, if her husband was willing. Meanwhile, she asked the old man to carry on with the present arrangements. Grandfather Momun told her not to grieve. The most important thing was that she live in peace with her husband; everything else would take care of itself. As for her son, she mustn't give in to heartbreak.

"As long as I'm alive, I'll never give the little fellow to anybody. And when I die, God will be his guide. As long as he lives and breathes, he'll work out his own fate ..." Listening to the old man, Aunt Bekai and old grandma sighed from time to time and even shed tears together.

It was at this very occasion, over tea, that the conversation turned to his father as well. Grandfather had heard that his former son-in-law, the lad's father, was apparently still a sailor serving on the same ship, and that he too had a new family, including two or perhaps three children. They lived near the pier. It was said that he'd given up drinking. And that his new wife always went out with the kids to meet him on the pier. "They must be meeting *his* steamship," the lad thought. "That very one ..."

The steamship pushed on, slowly moving away. White and long, it glided along the lake's blue glassiness with its funnels smoking—and didn't know that towards it was swimming a lad who'd turned into a fish-boy.

He dreamed of turning into a fish so that everything on him would be fish-like: body, tail, fins and scales—only his head would stay his own. A big round head on a thin neck, with protruding ears and a nose covered with scratches. And the same eyes that he'd had before—not exactly the same, of course, because they'd be able to see like a fish's.

The lad's eyelashes were very long, like the calf's, and something was always making them flutter on their own accord. Guljamal said that if her daughter had his, she'd be a dazzling

beauty. But why be beautiful? Or handsome? As if that were any good. For him personally, pretty eyes weren't worth anything; he needed the kind that could see under water.

The transformation would take place in grandfather's pond. One two *three*—and he'd be a fish. Then he'd vault straightaway from the pond into the river, directly into the seething stream, to swim downriver with the current. Then it would go like this: he'd keep leaping up and looking around—because it's dull, after all, to swim only under water. He'd swim fast down the swift river, alongside the red clay precipices, across the rapids, and through the surf, past the mountains and forests. He'd say farewell to his dear boulders. "Goodbye 'lying camel', goodbye 'wolf', goodbye 'saddle', goodbye 'tank'." And when he'd swim past the cordon, he'd leap out of the water and wave his fin to grandfather. "Goodbye *Ata.** I'll be back soon."

Grandfather would be struck dumb with the wonder of it all and wouldn't know what to do. And old grandma, Aunt Bekai and Guljamal with her daughter—they'd all stand there with their mouths open. Who's ever heard of such a thing?—a person's head on a fish's body. He'd wave his fin to them too: "Goodbye, I'm swimming out to the Issik-Kul and the white steamship. I've got my sailor-papa out there."

Baltek would no doubt jump up to chase along the bank. After all, the dog had never never seen anything like this. But if Baltek got up the courage to jump into the water after him, he'd shout. "No Baltek, no. You mustn't—you'll drown!" All this time, he himself would be swimming on, farther downriver. He'd dive through the ropes of the suspension bridge and keep going farther, past the bushes and wooded parts on the bank. And then, plunging through the roaring gorge, he'd swim right out into the Issik-Kul.

* *Ata:* a Central Asian term for grandfather, indicating high respect and affection.

The Issik-Kul was a whole sea. He'd swim along its waves, from wave to wave, wave to wave, until he'd finally ease right up to the white steamship. "Hello, white steamship, it's me," he'd say to the ship. "I'm the one who was always looking at you through the binoculars." The people on board would be amazed and flock together on the run to examine the wonder. Then he'd say to his father, the sailor: "Hello, papa, I'm your son. I've swum out to you."

"What do you mean, you're my son? Why, you're half-fish and half-human."

"You just take me up there with you, on the ship—and I'll become your real-live natural son."

"Bless my heart! Well then, let's give it a try." And father would lower a net, fish him out of the water and bring him up on deck. Then he'd turn back into himself again. And after this, after this . . .

After this, the white steamship would keep sailing on. The boy would tell his father about everything he knew, about his whole life. About the mountains among which he lived, about his same favourite rocks, about the river and the forest preserve. And about grandfather's pond, where he'd learned to swim like a fish—with his eyes open.

He'd tell, of course, about how his life went with grandfather. His father mustn't think that if the man was called Efficacious Momun, that meant he was bad. There wasn't a single grandfather like him anywhere, he was the very best grandaddy. But he wasn't a bit cunning, that's why everybody laughed at him. Because he wasn't the tiniest bit cunning. But Uncle Orozkul—he shouted at him, screamed at an elderly man! He sometimes even raised his voice at him in front of other people. And instead of standing up for himself, grandfather always forgave Uncle Orozkul—even did his work for him in the forest, the chores and managing things. But work was nothing compared to the rest. When Uncle Orozkul

came back drunk, instead of spitting into his wicked eyes, grandfather ran up to greet him, lifted him down from his horse and helped him into his house. He stretched him out on his bed and covered him up with his winter sheepskin so that he wouldn't get a chill or a headache. And afterwards he unsaddled the horse and groomed it, then gave it some fodder. And all because Aunt Bekai's unfertile. Why is it like that, papa? It'd be better like this: if you want children, go ahead and have them; if not, you don't have to.

Grandfather feels bad when Uncle Orozkul beats Aunt Bekai. It'd be easier for him if he beat grandfather himself. How he feels the hurt when Aunt Bekai screams! But what can he do? He wants to rush to his daughter's rescue, but old grandma won't let him. "Keep your nose out of it," she says. "They'll settle it themselves. What business is it of yours, you old geezer? She's not your wife, so sit down and shut up."

"But she's my daughter."

"And what would you do," old grandma answers, "if you didn't live close by, didn't live right next door, but someplace far away? Gallop over to separate them every time? Then who'd keep your daughter for a wife?"

Old grandma who I'm telling you about—she's not the same one as before. You probably don't know her, papa. It's a new grandma. My own granny died when I was small. Then this one came. We have tricky weather sometimes—it can be clear, then cloudy; it can rain and even hail. And old grandma's like that too—you can never tell with her. She can be kind or mean, and sometimes she's neither one nor the other. When she's angry, she wears you right out. Grandfather and I don't say anything. She says that no matter how much you feed or clothe an outsider, you can't expect any good from him. But honest, papa—I'm not an outsider here. I always lived with grandfather. She's the outsider—she came only later. And began to call me an outsider.

In winter, we have snows that come right up to my chin. Gosh, the drifts that pile up! In the forest, you can move about only on Alabash, the grey horse: he ploughs through drifts with his chest. And the wind's so strong you can hardly keep your feet. When the waves whip up on the lake, when your ship rolls from side to side—you should know that it's our San-Tash wind that's rocking the lake. Grandfather told me that long, long ago, enemy forces came here to capture control of our lands. And at that time, such a wind blew up from our San-Tash that the enemy couldn't stay in their saddles. They got off their horses but couldn't even move forward on foot. The wind whipped their faces until they bled. Then they turned away from the wind, but it drove at their backs so that they couldn't look around. It didn't even let them hold their ground, and the wind drove every last one of them from the Issik-Kul. That's the way it was. And now we live with this wind! It starts its blowing right where we are. All winter the forest on the other side of the river creaks, howls and groans in the wind. It's even scary sometimes.

There's an awful lot of work in the forest in winter. Where we are, there are no people at all in winter—not like in summer, when the nomad breeders come. I love it in summer when people with flocks and herds stay overnight on the big meadow. True, they go off into the mountains in the morning, but all the same it's good to be with them. Their women and kids come along in lorries. The lorries transport the *yurts** and all kinds of things they need. After they've settled down a bit, grandfather and I go down to greet them. We greet each and every one with handshakes—me too.

Grandfather says that younger people should always be first to offer their hands to older people. Anyone who doesn't put out his hand doesn't respect people. And besides, grandfather says, out of every seven people, one can turn out to be a

cular tent of wood and felt used by the peoples of Central Asia.

prophet. A prophet is a very kind and wise man. Anyone who shakes hands with one will stay happy his whole life. And I say if that's true, why doesn't this prophet say he's a prophet so that we'd all shake his hand? Grandfather laughs. That's the whole point, he says: a prophet doesn't know himself that he's a prophet—he's just an ordinary man. Only a thief knows about himself that he's a thief. I don't quite understand this, but I always greet people, even though I'm sometimes a little ashamed.

But when grandfather and I go down to the meadow, then I'm not embarrassed.

"Welcome to the summering place of your fathers and ancestors. Your cattle and souls are, I trust, in a state of well-being? And your children?" That's the way grandfather talks. But I only shake hands. Everybody knows grandfather and he knows everybody. That makes him feel good. He holds conversations with people, asks them about everything and tells them all about how we live. I don't know what to talk about with the kids. But then we begin playing hide-and-seek and war games—we start having so much fun that I don't want to leave. If only it was always summer, if only I could always play with the other boys on the meadow!

While we're playing, the camp fires begin to burn. I guess you think, papa, that the fires light up the whole meadow. Far from it! It's only bright near the flames, but beyond the little patch of light, it's darker than ever. We play war games in the darkness—hiding or attacking—and it's just as if we were in a real film. If you're the commander, everybody obeys you. It must be fine for a commander to be a commander . . .

Then the moon comes out over the mountains. It's even better in moonlight, but grandfather calls me back in. We go home across the meadow and bushes. The sheep are lying quietly and the horses are grazing all around. We walk home and hear: somebody starts singing a song. A young shepherd

probably, or maybe an old one. Grandfather stops me. "Listen. You can't always hear those songs." We stand still and listen. Grandfather sighs. The song makes him nod his head.

Grandfather says that long ago one khan had another khan prisoner. And this khan said to the captive-khan: "If you want to, you can live as my slave. Otherwise I'll fulfil your most cherished wish and then kill you." The other one thought before answering: "I do not wish to live as a slave. I'd rather you kill me, but before this, summon the first shepherd you meet from my homeland." "Why do you want him?" "Before my death, I want to hear him sing." Grandfather says that people give their lives for their native songs. Who are these people? I'd like to see them. I guess they live in big cities?

"Listen—how wonderful to listen," grandfather whispers. "What songs they used to sing, my boy . . ." I don't know why, but I begin to feel so sorry for my grandfather and I love him so much that I want to cry.

Early in the morning, everybody's already disappeared from the meadow. They've driven the sheep and horses farther on, into the mountains for the whole summer. Right on their heels, new nomads come, from other collective farms. During the day, they don't stop but go straight on past. But at night, they stay over on the meadow. And grandfather and I go down to greet them. He loves to greet people very much, and I learned how from him. Maybe some day on the meadow I'll shake hands with a real prophet . . .

In winter, Uncle Orozkul and Aunt Bekai go off to the city to see a doctor. They say that a doctor can help by giving the kinds of medicines that will make a child come. But old grandma always says that it's best of all to go to a holy place. It's somewhere over there beyond the mountains, where cotton grows in the fields. You see, papa, on this level plain over there—so level that you'd think there shouldn't be any

mountains—there's this holy mountain: Suleiman Mountain. And if you slaughter sheep at the foot of the mountain and pray to God, then climb up the mountain, bowing and praying to God at every step—and also ask Him very nicely—he can take pity on you and give you a child. Aunt Bekai wants very much to go there, to climb up Suleiman Mountain, but Uncle Orozkul isn't very eager. It's far away. It'll cost lots of money, he says. You can only get there on an airplane over the mountains, after all. And it's very far to the airplane, which also costs money . . .

When they go off to the city, we're left all alone in the cordon. We and our neighbours—Uncle Seidakhmat and his wife Guljamal and their little daughter. That's all of us there are.

In the evening when all the work's done, grandfather tells me stories. I know that outside it's a pitch-black and freezing cold night. The wind is furious. On those nights even the biggest mountains of all lose heart and push in all together, closer to our house—to the light in our little windows. It makes me frightened and happy. If I were a giant, I'd put on a giant's sheepskin and go out of the house. I'd tell them, the mountains, very loudly: "Don't lose heart, mountains, I'm here. Even if there's a wind, even if it's dark, or there's a snowstorm, I'm not afraid of anything. And don't you be afraid either. Stay in your own places, don't bunch up all together."

Then I'd push through the snowdrifts and step over the river into the forest. Because the trees get terribly frightened at night, alone in the forest. They're all alone and nobody talks to them. The naked trees get a chill in the hard frosts—they've no place for shelter. And I'd walk through the forest and pat each tree on its trunk, so it wouldn't be afraid. Probably the trees that don't go green in spring are ones that were chilled with fear. We cut down these dead ones for firewood.

I think about all this when grandfather tells me tales. He tells long, long ones. He has all kinds—funny ones, especially about the boy the size of a thumb called Chipalak, who the greedy wolf swallowed, to its own grief. No, first he was eaten by a camel. Chipalak fell asleep under a leaf, and the camel wandered near by—and oop! ate him together with the leaf. That's why people say: no camel ever knew, what he did chew. Chipalak began to shout and call for help, and his old parents had to cut open the camel to rescue him.

But what happened to the wolf was even worse. He too swallowed Chipalak because of his own stupidity—and then cried bitter tears. The wolf had stumbled upon Chipalak. "What's this gnat getting in my way? I'll lick you up in a twinkling." But Chipalak said: "Don't you touch me, wolf, or I'll make you into a dog." "Ho ho," the wolf laughed. "Who ever heard of that—a wolf turning into a dog? I'm going to eat you up for your cheek." And he swallowed him. Swallowed and forgot.

But from that moment, his life as a wolf was finished. As soon as he'd start sneaking up on some sheep, Chipalak would cry from inside him "Hey—shepherds ... wake up! It's me, the grey wolf sneaking up—to drag off a sheep." The wolf wouldn't know what to do. He'd bite himself in his flanks or roll over on the ground. But this wouldn't stop Chipalak shouting, "Hey, shepherds—run over here. Beat me, flog me!" The shepherds would fall on the wolf with clubs; the wolf would try to flee. The shepherds ran after him, full of wonder and awe. The big bad wolf had gone barmy: although running away, he himself was also shouting. "Catch up to me, dear chaps, beat me, have no pity." The shepherds would collapse with laughter, and at that moment the big bad wolf would take to his heels. But it did him no good. Wherever he poked his nose, Chipalak did him down. He was chased away everywhere and laughed at everywhere. The wolf grew scraggy

from hunger; only skin and bones were left. He gnashed his teeth and whined, "What am I being punished for like this? Why am I bringing all hell down on myself? Am I going senile in my old age, going off my whacky mind?" Chipalak would whisper into his ear. "Run over to Tashmat, he's got some plump sheep! Trot down to Bdimat, his dogs are deaf. Go up to Ermat, his shepherds are sleeping." But the wolf would just sit there and snivel: "I'm not going anywhere. The only place I can go is to hire myself out to somebody as a dog."

It's really a funny tale, isn't it, papa? Grandfather has other tales too—unhappy, scary and sad. But my favourite story of all is about Horned Deer-Mother. Grandfather says that everybody who lives on the Issik-Kul should know this story. Not to know it is a sin. Maybe you know it, papa? Grandfather says that every word is true. That it all happened once upon a time. That we're all children of Horned Deer-Mother. You and I and everybody else . . .

That's how we live in winter. Winter drags on for a very long time. If it weren't for grandfather's tales, it would be awfully dull for me in winter.

But it's fine here in spring. When it warms up fully the shepherds come to the mountains again. And then we're not alone in the mountains. Still, nobody lives on the other side of the river, in back of us. Only the forest is there, and everything that lives in the forest. That's why we live on the cordon—so that no one sets foot there, no one touches even a single branch. Even learned people come to visit us. Two women, both in pants, a little old man and also a young man. The young man was their student. They lived here a whole month—gathering all kinds of grasses, leaves and branches. They said that there are very few forests left on earth like ours in San-Tash. You can say there are almost none. Therefore every tree in the forest must be protected.

And I used to think that our grandfather watched over every tree just like that, for no particular reason. He doesn't like it at all when Uncle Orozkul gives away fir trees for building logs.

III

THE WHITE STEAMSHIP steamed away. By this time, you couldn't make out its funnels in the binoculars. Soon it would pass out of sight. It was now time for the lad to make up an ending to his voyage on his father's ship.

Although everything up to this point always came out well, the ending never worked. He could picture quite easily how he turned into a fish and swam downriver, into the lake. How he intercepted the white steamship and met up with his father. And everything he told his father. But after that, things wouldn't hang together. Because, for example, the shore would already be in sight. The ship would be steering for the pier, the sailors getting ready to go ashore. Then they'd all separate to make their way home. Father would have to go home too. His wife and two children would be waiting for him on the pier.

What now? Would he go with his father? Would his papa take him along? If he did, his wife would ask: "Who's that, where did he come from, why is he here?" No, it was better not to go . . .