

## VII

THE LAD WOKE early in the morning from the touch of a hand. Grandfather's hand was cold from the outdoors. The lad involuntarily huddled himself up.

"Lie there, just lie still." Grandfather warmed his hands with his breath, then felt the lad's forehead and placed his palm on his chest and stomach. "Have you come down with something?" asked grandfather with distress. "You've got a fever. And I was wondering, what's he doing in bed? It's time for school."

"Right away, I'm getting up," said the lad lifting his head slightly. Everything whirled before his eyes and there was a buzzing in his ears.

"Don't you even dream of getting up." Grandfather settled the lad on the pillow. "Who's going to take you to school, sick like that? All right, let's see your tongue."

The lad tried to persist.

"The teacher will scold me. She's very cross when children skip school."

"She won't scold anybody. I'll tell her myself. Come on, let's see your tongue."

Grandfather carefully examined the lad's tongue and throat. For some time, he felt for his pulse: coarsened by hard work, grandfather's rough fingers by some miracle caught the heart's impulses in the lad's hot, sweaty wrist. Convinced of something, the old man uttered comfortingly.

"God is merciful. You've just got yourself a cold. The cold got into you. You lie in bed today and before you go to sleep, I'll rub your soles and chest with hot sheep fat. You'll sweat it out and, God willing, get up tomorrow morning like a wild donkey."

Remembering yesterday and what still awaited him, old man that he was, Momun grew gloomy. Sitting at his grandson's bedside, he sighed and fell into thought.

"Forget about it," he whispered with a sigh. "When did you get sick, then?" he addressed the lad. "Why didn't you say anything? Was it last evening, or when?"

"Yes, towards evening. When I saw the marals across the river. I ran back to you. Then I began to feel cold."

"Never mind," the old man said, for some reason with a guilty voice. "You lie there and I'll be off."

He stood up, but the lad stopped him.

"*Ata*, that was Horned Deer-Mother herself out there, wasn't it? The one that was white as milk. And with those eyes—they looked at you like a person's . . ."

"You're a funny little one," said old man Momun, smiling warily. "All right, let it be your way. Maybe it was her," he said hollowly. "Wondrous Deer-Mother, who knows. I reckon that . . ."

The old man did not finish. Old grandma appeared at the door. Hurrying in from the yard, she'd already wormed something out.

"You get yourself over there, old man," she began from the threshold. At this grandfather Momun immediately hung his head, turning pitiful and dejected. "They want to drag the

log out of the river with a lorry," said old grandma. "So you get over there and do everything you're ordered . . . Oh my God, the milk isn't even boiled," old grandma suddenly remembered and set about lighting the stove and clattering the dishes.

The old man frowned. He wanted to object to something, to say something. But old grandma wouldn't let him open his mouth.

"What are you staring at?" old grandma said in annoyance. "What's this pig-headed nonsense? We can't afford to be pig-headed, sorrow of my life. Who are you against them? Big men have come to see Orozkul, go have a look. And what a lorry they came in! You can load it up with ten logs and it'll still get them through the mountains. And Orozkul won't even look at us. No matter how I pleaded with him and lowered myself. He won't let your daughter set foot in the house. Your barren-belly is hanging around at Seidakhmat's. She's cried her eyes out—and curses you, her brainless father."

"That's enough." The old man lost his patience and, heading towards the door, said, "Give the little shaver some hot milk, he's sick, understand?"

"I'll give him the hot milk, I'll give it to him. And you get going for the love of God." Driving the old man out, she was still mumbling. "What on earth's come over him? He never crossed anybody, he was as meek as a lamb—then this all of a sudden. On top of everything he jumps on Orozkul's stallion, then gallops away on it. All this is because of you," she said shooting an evil glance in the lad's direction. "If only it'd been somebody worth-while to stir up a hornet's nest for."

She brought the lad some hot milk with yellow boiled butter. The milk burned his lips but old grandma insisted, forcing him.

"Drink it as hot as you can, don't be afraid to drink. Only hot stuff can drive out the cold."

The lad burned himself and tears appeared in his eyes. And old grandma suddenly grew kinder.

"All right cool yourself down a bit. Imagine that," she sighed, "he gets himself sick at a time like this."

For a long time now the lad had badly wanted to urinate. He got up, feeling a kind of strange, pleasant weakness throughout his body. But old grandma held him back.

"What's this, you want to piss?"

"Yes," the lad confessed.

"Wait a minute. I'll be right back."

She brought him a basin.

Turning aside awkwardly, the lad directed a stream into the basin, puzzling over the heat and yellowness of his urine.

He felt much better now. His head ached less.

The lad lay quietly in his bed, grateful to old grandma for her good turn. He decided that he must get well by morning and go to school without fail. He thought too of how he'd tell in school about the three marals who'd appeared in their forest. And that the white dam maral was Horned Deer-Mother herself, and with her was a calf, already big and strong, and with them was a strapping brownish maral with huge horns; he was very strong and protected Horned Deer-Mother and her young from wolves. And he thought of how he'd tell too that if the marals stayed with them and never went away, then Horned Deer-Mother would soon bring Uncle Orozkul's and Aunt Bekai's magic cradle.

In the morning, the marals made their way down to the water. They came down from the upper forest when the brief autumn sun had half risen above the mountain ridges. The higher the sun climbed, the lighter and warmer it became down below in the mountains. After the night's numbness, the forest came to life and filled with the stirrings of light and colour.

Threading their way through the trees, the marals moved unhurriedly, warming themselves in sunny clearings and nibbling at dewy leaves on branches. They were travelling in the same order—the stag in front, calf in the middle, and bulky-flanked dam, Horned Deer-Mother, at the rear—and descended along the same trail on which Orozkul and grandfather Momun had yesterday hauled the ill-fated pine log towards the river. Traces of the portage remained fresh on the black mountain soil: a ploughed furrow with tattered shreds of turf. This trail led to the ford where the log had been abandoned, stuck in the river's rapids.

The marals were heading here because it was convenient for watering. Orozkul, Seidakhmat and the two men who had come for the log were going there to see how best to drive up the lorry so as to hook on a steel cable and drag the log from the river. Grandfather Momun shambled uncertainly behind the others, hanging his head. He didn't know how to act after yesterday's brawl, how to conduct himself or what to do. Would Orozkul let him work? Would he drive him off, like yesterday when he'd wanted to pull out the log with the horse? What if he said: "And what are you doing here? Weren't you told that you're fired from your job?" What if he dressed him down in front of the others and sent him home? The old man was beset by doubts and walked as if to a place of torture—but kept on nevertheless. Old grandma followed behind. She came as if on her own business, seemingly out of curiosity. But in fact she was escorting the old man. She'd driven Efficacious Momun to a reconciliation with Orozkul, so that he would merit Orozkul's forgiveness.

Orozkul strode on with an air of importance and proprietorship. Puffing and panting, he looked severely all around him as he moved. And although his head ached from his binge, he was enjoying the satisfaction of revenge. Looking back, he saw grandfather Momun shuffling after him, like a devoted dog

after a beating by his master. "This is nothing so far—you'll sing yet another tune for me. I won't even set eyes on you now. For me, you're empty space. More's coming. You'll fall at my feet at your own choice." Orozkul gloated, remembering how his wife had howled with a heart-rending cry at his feet the night before—when he had booted her and drove her out of the house with his kicks. "That's the way it's going to be. I'll send off the two men with the logs here and then I'll bring them together once more so they have a nice wrangle. Now she'll gouge out her father's eyes. She's gone wild, like a she-wolf," thought Orozkul during breaks in the conversation while pressing on with one of the men who'd arrived.

This man was called Koketai. He was a dark, hefty muzhik—a collective farm lock-keeper from the lake-land who had long cultivated a friendship with Orozkul. A dozen or so years ago, Koketai had built himself a house. Orozkul helped with the timber, selling him logs on the cheap for sawing up into planks. Then the muzhik married off his eldest son and built a house for the young couple. Again Orozkul supplied the timber. Now Koketai was setting up his younger son in a separate house and once more timber was needed for construction. And again his old friend Orozkul gave him a hand. Wasn't it terrible, how hard life was! You finished one thing and you thought, all right, now I'm going to live in peace. But then life thought up something new for you. And nowadays you were lost without people like Orozkul.

"God willing, we'll be inviting you to the house-warming soon," said Koketai to Orozkul. "Come on out to our place, we'll celebrate properly."

The latter puffed smugly and exhaled his cigarette smoke.

"Thanks. When I'm invited, I don't refuse. And if I'm not invited, I don't fish for it. If you ask me—right, I'll come. It won't be the first time I've enjoyed your hospitality. I was just thinking: shouldn't you wait till evening so you can drive out

in the dark? The main thing is to get through the state farm unnoticed. Otherwise, if they spot you . . .”

“Yeah, that’s true,” wavered Koketai. “But it’s a long time to wait until evening. We’ll drive out on the quiet. There’s no control point on the road, is there, to check us? If we bump into the police or somebody else by accident . . .”

“That’s the whole thing,” grumbled Orozkul, wincing from heartburn and his headache. “You can drive around on your errands for a hundred years and not meet one of those dogs. But you haul some logs once in a hundred years and get into a pretty pickle. It’s always like that . . .”

They fell silent, each thinking his own thoughts. Orozkul was now deeply vexed that he’d had to abandon the log in the river yesterday. Otherwise it would have been ready; they’d have loaded it at night and sent the lorry out of sight at dawn . . . Ekh, why did that lousy business have to turn up yesterday! All because of that old imbecile Momun—he decided to rebel, wanted to wriggle out of control, out of his subordination. Well, never mind! Whatever he tried, he won’t get away with this so easily . . .

The marals were drinking when the group arrived at the opposite bank of the river. People are strange creatures—full of noise and commotion. Absorbed in their own talk and concerns, they didn’t notice the animals opposite, just across the river.

The marals were in the red, morning-fresh bushes of the riverside woods, standing in water up to their ankles on the clear, pebbled bottom of the shallow along the bank. They drank in small gulps, unhurriedly and with breaks. The water was icy. The sun above shone more and more warmly and pleasantly. Satisfying their thirst, the marals took pleasure in the sun. The heavy dew which had gathered from the branches along the way evaporated on their backs. A slight mist arose from their fur. The morning was peaceful and blissful.

But still the people didn’t notice the marals. One of them returned to the lorry while the others remained on the bank. Pricking their ears, the marals keenly caught the unaccustomed noises which reached them and stood stock-still, their skin quivering, when a lorry with a trailer appeared on the other bank, roaring and rumbling. The marals stirred and decided to move away. But when the lorry suddenly stopped, and ceased its roaring and droning, the animals lingered. Nevertheless, they cautiously began to move: the people on the other bank talked too loudly and moved about with too much bustle.

The marals trod slowly up the path into the thin woods along the river; their flanks and horns showing here and there among the bushes. Yet still the people did not notice them. Only when the marals began to cross the glade of dry sand to which the high water reaches did the people see them, as clearly as a hand before their faces. There they were, on the lilac sand, lit by the bright sun. The people froze in various poses, with open mouths.

“Look at that, look!” Scidakhmat cried first. “Deer. Where did they come from?”

“What are you shouting for, what’s all that noise?” mouthed Orozkul casually. “What do you mean deer—they’re marals. We already saw them yesterday. Where’d they come from? They just came, I suppose.”

“Ai, ai, ai,” said hefty Koketai with delight, and undid his throttling shirt collar out of excitement. “They’re sleek, all right,” he said admiringly. “Been feeding well . . .”

“And what a dam. Look at how she strides,” the driver echoed him, his eyes goggling.

“Honest to God, like a two-year-old mare. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And what a bull! Look at those horns on him,” muttered Koketai, his pig-like eyes glistening with lust. “How does he

carry them? And they're not afraid of a thing. Where could those kind come from, Orozkul?"

"They're from the preserve, I suppose," answered Orozkul importantly, with a full sense of his proprietor's eminence. "They came over through the pass, from the other side. They're not afraid of anything? Because they've never had a chance to be frightened—that's why they're not afraid."

"Ekh, if I only had a gun now," blurted Seidakhmat suddenly. "They'd fetch two hundredweight,\* eh?"

Momun, who had been meekly standing to one side until now, could not restrain himself.

"What are you talking about, Seidakhmat?" he said in a low voice. "It's forbidden to hunt them."

Orozkul flung a sullen glance at the old man from the corner of his eye. "You still dare to show your tongue here," he thought with hatred. He wanted to smother him in curses so he'd drop dead on the spot, but restrained himself. After all, outsiders were present.

"Nobody asked for your lectures," he pronounced irritably, not glancing at Momun. "Hunting's forbidden over there where they live—on their own grounds. But they don't live over here with us. And we're not responsible for them—is that clear?" Orozkul glanced threateningly at the floundering old man.

"It's clear," answered Momun submissively and stepped aside, hanging his head. At this point, old grandma furtively jerked his sleeve again.

"If only you'd hold your tongue," she hissed reproachfully. Everyone dropped his eyes in shame.

Again they began following the animals, now moving away along the steep trail. The marals climbed up the precipice in Indian file. The brownish stag was in front, proudly carrying his powerful horns; then the hornless calf and Horned Deer-

\* Two hundred kilos.

Mother, bringing up the rear. Against the background of the clean, clayey fault, the marals looked precise and graceful. Every step and every movement was visible.

"Ekh, what beauty," said the driver, giving in to his rapture. He was a lobster-eyed young man, seemingly very gentle. "What a shame I didn't bring my camera, there'd be some . . ."

"All right, enough of the beauty stuff," interrupted Orozkul in resentment. "And enough standing around. You can't fill your belly on beauty. Let's get going—back the lorry up to the bank, straight into the water so it's on the edge. And you, Seidakhmat, take off your boots," he commanded, revelling to himself in his power. "And you, too," he indicated to the driver. "Let's hook the cable to that log. And step on it—we've still got something else to take care of."

Seidakhmat set about pulling off his boots. They were slightly too small for him.

"What are you looking at?" old grandma shoved the old man imperceptibly. "Take off your boots too, and get into the water," she prompted in a spiteful whisper.

Grandfather Momun scurried to pull off Seidakhmat's boots, then quickly shed his own. Meanwhile, Orozkul and Koketai gave directions to the lorry.

"Keep coming—over here. Here, keep it rolling."

"Left a little. Left—that's it."

"A little more."

Hearing the unfamiliar noise of a lorry below, the marals quickened their pace on the trail. Glancing about in alarm, they leapt up to the precipice and hid themselves in the birch trees.

"Oi, they've disappeared," sputtered Koketai. He exclaimed this with regret, as if a prey had escaped from his hands.

"Don't worry, they can't go anywhere," said Orozkul boastfully, taking pleasure in having read Koketai's thoughts.

"You won't go until evening—you'll be my guest. God's willed it. I'll give you a proper treat." Giggling, he thumped his friend on the shoulder. Orozkul could be gay too.

"Well, if that's the way it is," agreed hefty Koketai, revealing mighty yellow teeth in his smile. "You're the boss and I'm your guest."

The lorry was already on the bank, its rear wheels in the water up to its axles. The driver would not risk going in deeper. Now they had to run the cable out to the log. If the cable was long enough it wouldn't be particularly difficult to pull the log free from the grip of the underwater rocks.

The steel cables were long and heavy. They had to drag them through the water to the log. The driver took off his boots unwillingly, examining the water with apprehension. He hadn't yet made his final decision: did it pay to get into the river in his boots, or would it be better without them? "Maybe it's better barefoot," he thought. "In any case, the water will pour over the tops. The depth out there—almost to the hips. And then to walk around all day in wet boots." But he also imagined how cold the water must be in the river today. It was this that grandfather Momun took advantage of.

"Don't bother with your boots, young fellow," he said scampering up to him. "Seidakhmat and I will go in alone."

"Oh you shouldn't, *Aksakal*," objected the embarrassed driver.

"You're our guest and we're at home here," grandfather Momun persuaded. "You just sit behind the wheel."

Then he and Seidakhmat pulled a stake through the steel cable's skein and dragged it out across the water, while Seidakhmat howled bloody murder.

"Aw, aw—it's ice, not water."

Orozkul and Koketai smiled condescendingly and encouraged him.

"Stick to it, don't lose heart. We'll find something to warm you up with."

But grandfather Momun didn't utter a sound—did not even feel the icy cold. Wedging his head into his shoulders to make himself less noticeable, he worked his way in bare feet along the slippery underwater rocks, praying to God about one thing only: that Orozkul would not send him back, drive him off, curse him in front of others—that he forgive him, silly miserable old man that he was.

But Orozkul said nothing, appearing not to notice Momun's zeal nor take him for a human being. In his heart, however, he triumphed in having crushed the rebellious old man. "Well, well," laughed Orozkul to himself insidiously. "He's crawled up and sprawled at my feet. If only I had a bigger roost to rule, it wouldn't be his kind who I'd be twisting around my finger. Not his sort I'd make crawl in the dust. If they'd give me at least a collective or state farm; oh yes, I'd put things in order there. They've got too loose with handling people now. Then they themselves complain: people don't respect the chairman, don't you see, people don't look up to the director. Some little field hand, and he talks to the bosses like an equal. Because they're fools they don't deserve to be in power. Is that the way to deal with people? We had the good days once upon a time: heads flew and nobody made a sound. On the contrary—people loved it even more, sang even more praises. That was the way all right! And now? The littlest nothing of the nothings, and he suddenly takes it into his head to cross you. All right, fine. Crawl to me—just crawl." Glancing in old man Momun's direction from time to time, Orozkul gloated.

Dragging himself through the icy water and cowering, the latter tugged the cable together with Seidakhmat and took satisfaction in the fact that Orozkul, so it seemed, had forgiven him. "Please forgive me, this old man, that it happened that

way," he appealed to Orozkul mentally. "I lost control yesterday. Galloped to my grandson in school. Because he's all alone, you see—so I take pity on him. And today he didn't go to school at all. Came down with something. Forgive and forget—you're a part of the family too, remember. You think I don't want happiness for you and my daughter? If God granted it, if I heard the cry of a new-born of your wife, my daughter—you wouldn't get me to budge an inch, let God take my soul on the spot. I'd cry from happiness, I swear it. Only don't hurt my daughter, forgive me. And as for work, well, as long as I'm breathing, I'll work, all right. Do everything. Only tell me what you want . . ."

Standing off to the side on the bank, old grandma spoke to the old man with her gestures and entire appearance. "Keep trying, old man. You see, he's forgiven you. Do what I tell you and everything will work out."

The lad slept. He awoke but once, when a shot thundered out somewhere, then fell asleep again. Worn out by yesterday's sleeplessness and illness, he slept a deep and peaceful sleep. And in his sleep felt how pleasant it was to lie in bed, stretched out freely and unbothered by either fever or chill. He'd probably have slept through for a long time were it not for old grandma and Aunt Bekai. They tried to talk in undertones but made a clatter with the dishes, and the lad awoke.

"Hold on to this big cup here. And take the plate," said old grandma vivaciously in the hall. "And I'll take the sieve bucket. Oh my poor back. It's bushed. All this work we've done! But I'm so happy, thank God."

"Oi, don't talk about it, *Eneke*, I'm so happy too. Yesterday I was ready to die. If it weren't for Guljamal I'd have laid hands on myself."

"Don't talk like that," old grandma reasoned with her. "Did you take the pepper? Let's get moving. God himself

sent this gift for your reconciliation. Let's go, let's get moving."

As they were leaving the house—already on the threshold—Aunt Bekai asked old grandma about the lad.

"Is he still sleeping then?"

"Let him sleep for a while. When it's ready, we'll bring him some nice hot broth."

The lad slept no more. Feet and voices could be heard from the yard. Aunt Bekai laughed, and Guljamal and old grandma answered her with laughter. Unfamiliar voices of some kind drifted to him too. "It's probably only the people who came last night," the lad decided. "That means they haven't left yet." Yet grandfather Momun couldn't be heard or seen anywhere. Where could he be? What was it he was so busy with?

Listening to the voices from outside, the lad waited for his grandfather. He wanted very much to talk with him about the marals he'd seen yesterday. Winter was coming soon, remember. They'd have to leave them a good supply of hay in the forest. They must have enough to eat. The best would be to tame them so that they didn't fear people at all, so they'd come straight across the river and right up to the yard. And here we could give them some treat that they liked best of all. I wonder, what do they like best of all? The little maral calf could be trained to follow him everywhere. That would be really wonderful. Maybe he'd even go to school with him?

The lad waited for his grandfather, but he didn't appear. Instead, Seidakhmat came in suddenly, extremely pleased about something and in a gay mood. Seidakhmat was unsteady and smiled to himself. And when he came nearer, the smell of alcohol cut into the lad's nostrils. He very much disliked this nasty, sharp smell which reminded him of Orozkul's petty tyranny and of his grandfather's and Aunt Bekai's sufferings. But in contrast to Orozkul, Seidakhmat grew kind and gay when he drank, and in general turned into a kind of harmless

simpleton—although even when sober, he was not distinguished by his intelligence. In similar situations, roughly the following conversation would take place between him and grandfather Momun.

“What are you grinning at like an idiot, Seidakhmat? You’re pickled too?”

“*Aksakal*, I love you so much. Honest, *Aksakal*, like my own father.”

“Ekh, at your age . . . Others race around in lorries out there, and you can’t even cope with your own tongue. If I were your age, I’d at least be driving a tractor.”

“*Aksakal*, in the army, the commanding officer told me that I’m no good at those things. On the other hand, I’m an infantryman, and without the infantry, you can’t get anywhere.”

“Infantry! You’re a loafer, not an infantryman. And what a wife you have! God made an oversight. A hundred like you aren’t worth one Guljamal.”

“That’s why we’re here, *Aksakal*. I’m one and she’s one.”

“What’s the use of talking with you? Strong as a bull, and brains . . .” Grandfather Momun waved his hands in despair.

“Moo . . . o,” bellowed Seidakhmat in his direction, and laughed.

Then, stopping in the middle of the yard, he began to sing his queer song, which he’d learned God-knows-where.

From the chestnut-chestnut mountains,  
I arrived on a chestnut colt  
Hey, chestnut dealer, open the door  
We’ll drink some chestnut wine.

From the brown-brown mountains,  
I arrived on a brown bull,  
Hey, brown dealer, open the door,  
We’ll drink some brown wine . . .

This could go on forever, since he arrived from the mountains on a camel, a cock, a mouse, a turtle, on anything that moved. The lad liked Seidakhmat drunk better than sober.

Which is why he greeted him with a smile when Seidakhmat came in tipsy.

“Aha!” exclaimed Seidakhmat in surprise. “And they told me you’re sick. You’re not a bit sick—why aren’t you running around in the yard? This won’t do.” He fell into the lad’s bed and, overwhelming him with alcoholic breath and the smell of raw, fresh-killed meat from his hands and clothing, began to tug at the lad and kiss him. Overgrown with coarse bristles, his cheeks burned the lad’s face.

“Please that’s enough, Uncle Seidakhmat,” the lad begged. “Where’s granddaddy, did you see him?”

“Your grandfather’s there, I mean . . .” Seidakhmat whirled his arms vaguely in the air. “We’re ah . . . we dragged the log out of the water. So we had a bit to drink to warm up. And now he’s, I mean he’s . . . now he’s cooking the meat. Get up, why don’t you? Come on, get dressed—let’s go. What’s all this? It’s not fair. We’re all out there, and you’re alone here.”

“Grandfather didn’t give me permission to get up,” said the lad.

“Oh cut it out, didn’t give you permission. Let’s go have a look. This doesn’t happen every day. There’s a big feast today. A full bowl, a full spoon, a full mouth. Come on, get up!”

He began to dress the lad with drunken awkwardness.

“I’ll do it myself,” said the lad, trying to refuse and feeling faint pangs of dizziness. But drunken Seidakhmat wouldn’t listen. He thought he was doing a good deed since the lad had been left alone at home and the day was that rare one with a full bowl, full spoon and full mouth . . .

Shakily, the lad followed Seidakhmat out of the house. In



the mountains it was a windy, partly cloudy day. The clouds drifted quickly across the sky and the weather twice changed sharply while the lad walked across the veranda: from an unbearably bright sunny day to unpleasant duskiess. The lad sensed this and it made his head ache. Driven on by a gust of wind, the smell of a wood fire struck him in the face. His eyes smarted. "They're probably doing the laundry today," he thought, for they usually made a fire in the yard on the day of a large wash, when the water was heated for all three houses in a huge black cauldron. One person couldn't lift this cauldron alone; Aunt Bekai and Guljamal managed it together.

The lad liked the big wash. For one thing, there was the fire in the open fireplace—you could play around with the flames, not like at home. Secondly, it was very entertaining to hang up the washed laundry. The lad also liked to steal up to the laundry hanging on a line and touch the wet cloth with his cheek.

This time, there was no laundry at all in the yard. But a great fire had been built under the big pot, and thick steam spewed up from the boiling vessel which was filled to its lip with big pieces of meat. The meat had already boiled down; its scent and the smell of the fire tickled the lad's senses and made him salivate. In a new red dress, new calf boots and a flowery light shawl thrown over her shoulders, Aunt Bekai was bending over the pot and draining off the foam with a ladle. And near her—standing on his knees—grandfather Momun poked at the hot logs in the fireplace.

"There he is, your grandfather," said Seidakhmat to the lad. "Let's go." And he'd hardly broken into his

From the ginger-ginger mountains,  
I arrived on a ginger colt . . .

when Orozkul—head shaved, an axe in his hand and his shirt-sleeves rolled up—appeared from inside the shed.

"Where've you been?" he called menacingly to Seidakhmat. "Our guest over here is splitting firewood"—he nodded towards the driver, who was working away at some logs—"and you're singing songs."

"Aw, we'll take care of that in a jiffy," Seidakhmat mollified him and headed towards the driver. "Give it here, brother. I'll do it myself."

The lad moved closer to his grandfather, who was still on his knees near the fireplace. He approached him from behind.

"Ata," he said.

Grandfather didn't hear.

"Ata," the lad repeated, touching his grandfather on the shoulder. The old man glanced back and the lad didn't recognise him. Grandfather was also drunk. The lad couldn't remember when he'd seen his grandfather even slightly tight. If it ever happened, it could only be at some funeral feast of Issik-Kul elders, where vodka is handed out to everyone, even the women. But just like this, for no reason—it had never yet happened with grandfather.

The old man directed a kind of strange, detached, frantic look at the lad. His face was hot and red and when he recognised his grandson, it reddened even more. It flushed with a flaming colour, then instantly blanched. Grandfather hurriedly got to his feet.

"What is it, eh?" he said hollowly, pressing his grandson to him. "What is it, eh? What is it?" Except for these words, he could pronounce nothing, as if he'd lost the gift of speech. His agitation was transmitted to the lad.

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

"Oh no, I'm just . . . it's nothing," mumbled grandfather Momun. "You go on, have a little walk. I'll take care of the firewood here, I mean . . ."

He almost pushed his grandson from him and, as if recoiling from the entire world, turned again to face the fireplace. He was on his knees; he did not look about him—didn't look at anything—but remained engrossed only in himself and the fire. The old man didn't see his grandson lounging about in bewilderment and walking across the yard towards Seidakhmat, who was busy cutting wood.

The lad didn't understand what had happened to his grandfather or what was taking place in the yard. It was only when he came nearer to the shed that he noticed a big mound of fresh red meat heaped up in a pile. It was on a hide stretched out on the ground, fur down. Pale little streams of blood were still oozing from the edges of the hide. Not far away, where the rubbish was usually thrown, the dog was shaking the entrails, rumbling with pleasure. Near the pile of meat, a stranger of some kind, a huge dark man, sat on his haunches like a lump. This was Koketai. He and Orozkul were carving the meat with knives in their hands. Leisurely, they tossed dismembered joints with the attached meat into various places on the stretched hide.

"What joy! And this wonderful smell," said the dark, hefty muzhik in a deep bass while sniffing at the meat.

"Take some more. Go on—take," Orozkul offered him generously. "Toss it onto your pile. God's given it to us from his herd in honour of your visit. It doesn't happen every day."

Orozkul puffed at this statement and got up occasionally to stroke his taut stomach, as if he'd had a huge meal of something; it was immediately evident that he'd already had a great deal to drink. Puffing huskily and feeling stifled, he tossed his head to draw breath. Fleshy like a cow's udders, his face was glossy with smugness and satiation.

The lad was struck dumb and overcome by a wave of cold when he saw the horned head of a maral beneath a wall of the shed. The severed head lay about in the dust, saturated with

dark blood-stains. It looked like a snag tossed from a road. Four legs, severed at the knee joint, were scattered around the head.

The lad stared with horror at this frightful scene. He did not believe his eyes. The head of Horned Deer-Mother lay before him. He wanted to run away from this spectacle but his legs did not obey him. He stood and gazed at the dead, disfigured head of the white maral. The very same creature who was Horned Deer-Mother only yesterday, who regarded him from the other bank with a kind fixed gaze; the very same with whom he'd talked in his thoughts and whom he'd implored to bring a magic cradle with a little bell on her horns. All this had suddenly turned into a shapeless heap of meat, a flayed hide, severed legs and a head flung away over there.

It was absolutely essential for the lad to leave, yet he stood there as if petrified, unable to comprehend how and why all this had happened. The dark, hefty muzhik, the man who was carving up the meat, speared a kidney from the pile with the tip of his knife and held it out to the lad.

"Here, laddie, roast it on the coals, it'll be delicious," he said.

The lad didn't budge.

"Take it!" ordered Orozkul.

Feeling nothing, the lad put out his hand and stood there, tightly gripping Horned Deer-Mother's tender, still-warm kidney in his cold hand. Meanwhile, Orozkul lifted the head of the white maral by its horns.

"My word, it's heavy," he said, bouncing it up and down to gauge its weight. "The horns alone weigh a ton."

He propped up the head sideways on a chopping block, picked up the axe and set about hacking the horns from the skull.

"What horns!" he kept repeating while plunging the cutting edge of the axe into the base of the horns with a crunch. "This is for your grandfather." He winked to the lad. "When

he croaks, we'll stick the horns on his grave. Then let anybody try to say we didn't respect him. What better respect? For these horns it wouldn't be a mistake to die straightaway, today!" Taking aim with the axe, he chuckled.

The horns wouldn't submit. Chopping them off turned out to be not so easy. The sodden Orozkul kept missing his mark, which enraged him. The head fell from the block and he began to chop at it while it lay on the ground. The head bounced away and Orozkul chased after it with the axe.

The lad shuddered, moving back on his heels involuntarily each time—but couldn't make himself leave. As in a nightmare, riveted in place by some sinister and incomprehensible power, he stood there and marvelled that Horned Deer-Mother's unblinking eye did not try to avoid the axe. It neither flinched nor cringed from fear. The head had been dragged through mud and dust for some time now but the eye remained clear and seemed still to look at the world with the mute, stupefied astonishment in which death found it. The lad was afraid that drunken Orozkul would land a blow in the eye.

Still the horns did not submit. Orozkul became more and more infuriated and wild; and not bothering to take aim now, he whacked at random at the head, using the butt of the axe as well as its blade.

"Wait, you'll smash the horns like that," said Scidakhmat, approaching. "Give it to me."

"Keep off. I'll do it myself," said Orozkul hoarsely, waving the axe. "Like hell I'll smash them up."

"All right, as you like," spat Scidakhmat, now heading towards his house. The same dark, hefty muzhik followed him, dragging his share of the meat in a big bag.

With drunken obstinacy, Orozkul continued to quarter Horned Deer-Mother's head behind the shed. One might have thought he was discharging a long awaited act of revenge.

"You bastard, you! You whore, you!" he shouted, foaming

at the mouth and kicking the head with his boot as if the dead object could hear him. "No no, you won't make a fool of me!" He attacked again and again with the axe. "If I don't finish you off, I won't be who I am. Take this. And this!" He smashed away with the axe. The skull cracked and splinters of bone flew in all directions.

The boy screamed briefly when the axe happened to land across the eye. A dark, thick liquid gushed out of the cleaved eye-socket. The eye died, disappeared, emptied . . .

"I can smash heads better than you are. And split off better horns," growled Orozkul in a paroxysm of wild malice and hatred of the innocent head.

At last he succeeded in staving in the skull at the forehead and top of the head. He threw away the axe, took a grip on the horns with both hands and, pressing the head to the ground with his foot, twisted at the horns with savage strength. When he tore them out they crackled, like ripped-out roots. These were the same horns on which, according to the lad's entreaties, Horned Deer-Mother was to have brought a magic cradle to Orozkul and Aunt Bekai.

The lad felt like fainting. He turned, dropped the kidney on the ground and slowly dragged himself away. He was very much afraid that he'd fall or vomit right there, in front of everybody. Pallid, with a cold, sticky perspiration on his forehead, he walked past the fireplace in which flames were shooting up fiercely and over which hot steam from the kettle was curling. And at which wretched grandfather Momun sat as before, his back turned to everyone, his face towards the fire. The lad decided not to trouble his grandfather. He wanted to get to his bed as quickly as he could, lie down and pull the covers over his head. To see nothing and hear nothing—to forget.

Aunt Bekai ran into him on the way. Dolled up preposterously—but with purplish-blue traces of Orozkul's

beating on her face—she had been dashing around all day, lean and inappropriately gay, on errands for the 'big meat'.

She stopped the lad. "What's wrong with you?"

"My head hurts," he said.

"Oh my sweet little silly one," she said suddenly in a wave of tenderness. And began to shower him with kisses.

She too was drunk and reeked repellently of vodka.

"His head hurts," she mumbled affectedly. "My little darling, my own. You're probably hungry."

"No, I'm not hungry. I want to lie down."

"All right, let's go, I'll put you to bed. What are you going to do, lying all alone? Everybody's going to be at our place, you see. The guests, the whole family. And the meat's already done." She pulled him with her. When they passed the fireplace again, Orozkul appeared from behind the shed, stewed and red like an inflamed udder. Near grandfather Momun, he triumphantly dropped the maral horns that he'd hacked off. The old man rose from his place.

Not looking at him, Orozkul lifted a bucket of water, turned it up towards his face, and began to drink, spilling water down his front.

"Now you can croak," he tossed off, tearing himself from the water and again falling upon the bucket. The lad heard his grandfather babble.

"Thank you, my son. Thank you. Now I'm not afraid to die. Why should I be?—with this honour for me, I guess you'd call it, and this respect."

"I'm going home," said the lad, feeling weak up and down his body.

Aunt Bekai did not listen to him.

"You've nothing to do at home all alone." And she took him into her house almost by force, settling him on a bed in the corner.

In Orozkul's house, everything was already ready for the

feast. Boiled, fried and roasted. Old grandma and Guljamal saw to all this with great animation. Aunt Bekai scurried on errands between the house and the fireplace in the yard. While waiting for the 'big meat', Orozkul and the dark, hefty Koketai took their pleasure in some tea, half lying on flowery blankets with pillows under their elbows. They had quickly put on high-horse airs and departed themselves like princes. Seidakhmat poured the tea for them into little drinking-bowls.

The lad lay quietly in the corner, tense and constrained. He was feverish again. He wanted to get up and leave, but was afraid that if he stood up from the bed, he'd vomit immediately. Therefore he convulsively held tight to the lump stuck in his throat, afraid to make an unnecessary move.

Soon the women called Seidakhmat into the yard, and he appeared back at the door with a mountain of steaming meat in a huge enamel bowl. He carried his burden with difficulty and set it before Orozkul and Koketai. Following him, the women carried in various other things to eat.

Everyone began to settle himself into a place, while knives and plates were made ready. While this was taking place, Seidakhmat poured vodka into the water-glasses.

"I'll be captain of the vodka," he roared with laughter and nodded at the bottles in a corner.

Grandfather Momun came in last. The old man had a queer, too-pitiful look today, even compared to his ordinary appearance. He wanted to squeeze in somewhere on the side, but dark, hefty Koketai magnanimously asked him to sit at his side.

"Come through over here, *Aksakal*."

"Thanks, we'll stay here," grandfather Momun tried to refuse. "We're at home, after all."

"But you're the oldest all the same," insisted Koketai, seating him between himself and Seidakhmat. "Let's drink to your success, *Aksakal*. You have the first toast."

Grandfather Momun cleared his throat uncertainly.

"To peace in this house," he managed to force out. "Where there's peace, there's happiness, my children."

"That's right, absolutely right," everyone joined in, tossing down his glass.

"And what about you?" Koketai reproached the embarrassed grandfather Momun. "No, that won't do. You wish happiness for your son-in-law and daughter—then don't drink yourself."

"Well if it's really for happiness, what can I say?" the old man hastened to pronounce. To everyone's surprise, he gulped down almost an entire water-glass of vodka to the bottom. Stunned, he began to shake his old head.

"Bravo!"

"Our old man tops them all!"

"Your old man's smashing!"

Everyone laughed, everyone was pleased, everyone praised grandfather.

It became hot and stuffy in the house. The lad lay in pain, feeling sick the entire time. He lay with his eyes open and heard the people champing, gnawing and puffing while stuffing themselves on Horned Deer-Mother's meat—heard them offering each other tasty pieces, clinking soiled glasses and tossing the picked bones into a bowl.

"This isn't meat, it's a young little colt," boasted Koketai, smacking his lips.

"What are we, asses or something?" said Orozkul. "To live in the mountains and not eat meat like this!"

"That's right, that's why we live here," echoed Seidakhmat.

Everyone lauded Horned Deer-Mother's meat. Old grandma, Aunt Bekai, Guljamal and even grandfather Momun. They also poked at the boy and served him some meat and other things on a plate. But he refused, and when they saw that he wasn't well, the drunken celebrants left him in peace.

The lad lay on the bed, clenching his teeth. It seemed to him

that this would help him cope with his nausea. But he was tormented even more by the recognition of his own helplessness—that he was powerless to do anything with these people who had killed Horned Deer-Mother. And in his righteous child's wrath—and his desperation—he dreamed up various kinds of vengeance: how he punished them and made them understand what a heinous crime they had committed. But he could think of nothing better than to call for Kulubek's help in his imagination. Yes, the very same fellow in the army field-jacket who'd come for the hay with the young drivers on that stormy night. He was the only person of all the lad knew who could overpower Orozkul and tell him the whole truth straight to his face.

At the lad's summons, Kulubek rushed there in his lorry and jumped out of the cab with a tommy-gun at the ready. "Where are they?" "They're over there." Together, they ran to Orozkul's house and flung open the door. "Don't make a move. Hands up!" ordered Kulubek threateningly from the doorstep, aiming the tommy-gun. They all lost their wits; everyone froze with fear where he sat. Pieces of food stuck in their gullets. With joints in their greasy hands, with greasy cheeks and fatty mouths, gorged and drunk, they couldn't even budge.

"All right, get up, you swine!" Kulubek thrust the tommy-gun to Orozkul's temple, and the latter, trembling all over and stuttering, fell at Kulubek's feet. "Have mercy, d-don't kill m-m-me." But Kulubek was implacable. "Get outside, you swine. This is your end." With a sharp kick, he prodded Orozkul in his fatty bum and forced him up and out of the house. Everyone else went out into the yard, fearful and mute.

"Up against the wall," Kulubek ordered Orozkul. "For killing Horned Deer-Mother, for chopping off her horns on which she brought the cradle—you'll die." Orozkul fell into

the dust and began to crawl, howl and groan. "Don't kill me, I don't even have children. I'm alone in the whole world, I don't have a son or a daughter . . ."

So much for his arrogance and his conceit. He was a miserable, measly coward. You don't even want to kill his kind.

"Okay, we won't kill him," the lad said to Kulubek. "But get this man out of here and see he never returns. He's not wanted here. Let him clear out."

Orozkul got up, pulled up his trousers and, too frightened to look around, trotted away—fat, flabby and in sagging breeches. But Kulubek stopped him. "Wait. We'll tell you one last thing. You'll never have children. You're a wicked, worthless man. Nobody likes you here. The forest doesn't like you, not a single tree does—not a single blade of grass. You're a fascist. Clear out—and make it forever. And you'd better be fast." Orozkul ran off without looking back. "*Schnell, schnell,*" Kulubek laughed after him, firing the tommy-gun into the air to scare him.

The lad rejoiced. And after Orozkul disappeared from sight, Kulubek told the others, who were standing guiltily at the door. "How did you put up with such a man? Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

The lad felt a sense of relief. A just trial had been carried out. And he so believed his dream that he forgot where he was and on what occasion people were drinking themselves drunk in Orozkul's house.

A spasm of laughter brought him back from this blissful state. The lad opened his eyes and listened. Grandfather Momun wasn't in the room—he'd probably gone out somewhere. The women were clearing away the dishes and preparing to serve tea. Scidakhmat was describing something loudly and the others were laughing at his words.

"And what then?"

"Go on, give us more."

"No listen, you tell us—repeat it again," asked Orozkul, almost dying of laughter. "What did you tell him about that thing? How'd you scare him? Oh, I can't take any more."

"Well it was like this . . ." Scidakhmat willingly undertook to repeat what he had already described. "As soon as we began to ride up to the marals—they were at the forest's edge, all three. As soon as we tied up the horses to some trees, the old man of mine suddenly grabs me by the arm. 'We can't shoot the marals,' he says. 'We're Buguans, the children of Horned Deer-Mother.' And he looks at me like a baby. Begging with his eyes. And me, I can't even stand on my feet, I'm breaking up with laughter. But I keep myself from laughing. Just the opposite, I play it real serious, 'What are you up to?' I say. 'You looking to spend some time in the clink?' 'No,' he says. 'But you know that *bai* fairy-tales were dreamt up in the dark *bai* days to, er, scare the poorly people.' Then his mouth opens. 'You don't say,' he says. 'Just you remember that,' I say, 'and drop all your crazy nursery stories. Or else I'll forget you're an old man and report about you to the right places.'"

"Haw, haw, haw," the others burst into laughter in unison. Orozkul most of all, for he savoured his laughter.

"So, then we steal up to them. Any other animal would have beat it out of there fast without a trace—but these half-witted marals don't run, you'd think they weren't afraid of us. So all the better, I think," boasted the drunken Scidakhmat. "I went ahead with the rifle. The old man followed behind. But now I began to have some doubts. I never shot a sparrow in my life—and now we had this thing to take care of. I'd probably miss, and then they'd dart through the forest and we'd have to track them down. It's no joke trying to keep up with them. And who'd want to miss a chance at game like that? But the old man's a hunter—he's dealt with bear in his time. So I say to him, here's the rifle, old man—you shoot. But he won't do

it for anything; shoot yourself, he says. So I tell him, I'm all pickled, I say. And I make myself stagger as if I can hardly stand on my feet. He'd seen himself when we dragged the log out of the river—we all downed a bottle together. So that's the game I played."

"Haw, haw, haw."

"I'll miss, I tell him. The marals will get away and won't come back a second time. And you and I better not come back empty-handed. You know that yourself. Don't you forget it. Why were we sent out here? He says nothing. And won't take the rifle. Okay, I say, if that's the way you want it. I dropped the rifle and made like I was leaving. He follows me. It's all the same to me, I say: if Orozkul throws me out, I'll get a job on the state farm. But what about you in your old age? He still says nothing. And I start off nice and easy—for the effect, that is.

From the ginger-ginger mountains,  
I arrived on a ginger colt,  
Hey ginger dealer, open the door . . ."

"Haw, haw, haw."

"He swallows it, thinks I'm really drunk. He goes to get the rifle. I turn back too. While we were arguing, the marals of ours had pushed on a bit farther. 'Now you look sharp,' I say, 'they'll get away and you won't catch up. Shoot while they're not scared.' The old man picked up the rifle. He began to creep up closer. And he keeps whispering, like an idiot: 'Forgive me, Horned Deer-Mother, forgive me . . .' And I'm at him with my line: watch out, I say, you'll slip up—and if you do, you can take off with the marals and follow your nose; you'd better not come back."

"Haw, haw, haw."

In the chortling and drunken fumes, the lad felt more and

more hot and suffocated. His head split from ever-swelling pain which would not stay inside its limits. It seemed to him that someone was kicking his head with his feet, that someone was chopping at his head with an axe. It seemed to him that someone was taking aim at his eyes with an axe and he jerked his head away in an attempt to dodge the blow. Fainting from the heat, he suddenly found himself in the ice-cold river. He had turned into a fish. The tail, body and fins—he was entirely a fish; only his head remained his own—and still ached. He swam in dark, muffled underwater coolness and thought about how he'd remain a fish forever now and never return to the mountains. "I won't come back," he said to himself, "it's better that I be a fish."

Behind the windows of Orozkul's house, drunken voices roared and shouted. The boorish haw-hawing deafened the boy and brought him unbearable pain and torment. It seemed to him that it was this appalling laughter that made him ill. Recovering his breath, he walked across the yard. It was deserted. Near the dying fire, the lad came upon grandfather Momun, deathly drunk. The old man was lying in the dust near Horned Deer-Mother's severed horns. The dog was chewing at the stump of the maral's head.

The lad roved farther. He went down to the river. And stepped directly into the water. Hurrying, slipping and falling, he ran across the shallows, shivering from the icy spray—and when he reached the rapids, the current knocked him off his feet. Floundering in the turbulent torrent, he swam, choking and freezing.

The lad swam down the river, at times face up, other times face down; sometimes being held back near piles of stones, other times rushing towards the waterfalls . . .

No one yet knew that the lad was swimming as a fish down the river. The drunken song sounded in the yard.

From the hunch-backed, hunch-backed mountains,  
I arrived on a hunch-backed camel,  
Hey, hunch-backed dealer, open the door  
We'll drink some bitter wine . . .

This song you no longer heard. You were swimming, my lad, into your tale. Did you know that you would never turn into a fish, not reach the Issik-Kul, not see the white steamship and say to it, "Hello, white steamship, it's me!"

You swam.

I can only say one thing now: you rejected what your child's heart could not reconcile itself to. And that's my consolation. You lived like a bolt of lightning which once—and only once—flashed and expired. But lightning strikes from the sky. And the sky is eternal. This too is my consolation. And that a child's conscience in a person is like an embryo in a particle of grain: the grain won't grow without the embryo. That whatever awaits us on earth, truth will endure forever, as long as people are born and die.

Taking leave of you, my lad, I repeat your own words. "Hello, white steamship, it's me."

## **Afterword**

by

Tatyana and George Feifer