The white steamship moved farther and farther away, turning into a speck you could hardly see. The sun already lay on the water. In the binoculars, you could see the lake's violet surface blazing blindingly.

The ship moved on and disappeared. That was the end of the tale about the white steamship. He had to go home.

The lad picked up his briefcase from the ground and clutched the binoculars under his arm. He descended from the mountain quickly, running in zigzags down the slope. And the closer he came to home, the more uneasy he felt inside. He had to face answering for the dress that the calf had chewed apart. He was already unable to think of anything except the punishment. So as not to lose heart completely, the lad said to the briefcase: "Don't be afraid. All right, we'll be yelled at. But I didn't do it on purpose, after all. I simply didn't know that the calf had run away. All right, I'll get a slap, I can take it. And if they slam you to the ground, don't be scared. You won't fall apart, you're a briefcase after all. Now if the binoculars fall into old grandma's hands, it won't be so healthy for them—so first we'll hide the binoculars in the shed, then we'll go home."

Which is what he did. And felt frightened to step inside his own house.

But an alarming hush reigned there. In the yard, it was as quiet and empty as if everyone had deserted the entire place. Apparently Aunt Bekai's husband had beaten her again. Once more, it fell to grandfather Momun to soothe his crazed son-in-law—again he had to plead, implore and hang on Orozkul's heavy fists. And to witness the full disgrace of his beaten, dishevelled, wailing daughter. And to hear his daughter cursed in the vilest of vile language and in the presence of her own father. Hear her called a barren bitch, a thrice-cursed desert she-ass and various other terms. And hear his daughter curse her fate in a wild, demented voice. "Am I the one who's guilty if God's kept me from conceiving? Millions of women in the world breed like sheep, yet I'm cursed in heaven. Why? Why was I given this life? I'd rather you killed me, you fiend. Here—beat me, beat away . . ."

Old Momun dolefully sat in a corner, still breathing hard. His eyelids were sealed and hands lay slanting on his knee. He was very pale.

Momun glanced at his grandson, said nothing, and again wearily shut his eyes. Old grandma wasn't home. She'd gone to reconcile Aunt Bekai with her husband and to put their house in order and pick up the broken dishes. That's the kind old grandma was: when Orozkul beat his wife, she stayed out of it and kept grandfather out. But after the brawl, she went over to calm them down with good sense. That, at least, was something to be thankful for.

Most of all, the lad felt sorry for the old man. Each time this happened, he sat in the corner as if stunned, hiding himself from everyone. He told no one, not a soul on earth, what he was thinking. During those moments, Momun was thinking that he was already an old man, and that he'd had a single son—who died during the war. Everyone had forgotten him now; no one remembered what he was like. If his son were alive, perhaps his fate would have taken a different turn. Momun pined for his dead wife, with whom he'd lived a whole lifetime. But his deepest grief was brought on by his daughters having drawn unhappy lots. Having plunked her grandson in his lap, the younger one had moved to the city where she lived in misery with a large family in one room. The other one lived a wretched life here with Orozkul. And although he, the old man, was with her and would endure everything for his own daughter's sake, the happiness of motherhood simply eluded her. She'd already spent many years with Orozkul. And was sick to death of her life with him—but where could she go? What would happen in the future? He himself would die any day now; he was an old man, after all. What then would befall his ill-fated daughter?

The lad hurriedly gulped some soured milk from a cup, ate a piece of home-baked bread and settled down very quietly next to the window. He decided not to turn on the light because he didn't want to disturb grandfather. Let him sit in peace there with his thoughts.

The lad was soon deep in his own thoughts. He couldn't understand why Aunt Bekai indulged her husband in vodka. Orozkul responded with his fists—after which she would bring him yet another half-litre.

Oh Aunt Bekai, Aunt Bekai. How many times had her husband beaten her half-dead, yet she always forgave him. And grandfather Momun always forgave him too. But why forgive? People like that shouldn't be forgiven. He's a worthless, nasty man. Nobody needs him here. We'd get along fine without him.

An embittered child's imagination graphically pictured a just punishment in the mind's eye of the lad. They would all pounce upon Orozkul, and drag him, the big, fat, dirty man, to the river. Then, having swung him once or twice, they'd toss him straight into the surf. And he'd beg forgiveness of Aunt Bekai and grandfather Momun. Because *he* couldn't turn into a fish . . .

The lad felt better. He even found his picture of Orozkul in his dreams funny—floundering in the river, with his corduroy hat floating alongside.

But to his great disappointment, grown-ups didn't behave as the lad thought fair. They always did the opposite. When Orozkul came home tipsy he was greeted as if nothing were wrong. Grandfather would see to his horse and his wife run to set the samovar. All as if everyone had only been waiting for him. Then he'd start throwing his weight around. First he'd be all sad and cry. As if to say, how could it have happened: every little nobody of a man, the kind people don't even bother to shake hands with, has children to his heart's content. Five, even ten. In what respect was he, Orozkul, worse than any of them? Why didn't things go right for him?

Maybe his job wasn't big enough? But for the love of God, he was the senior warden of a forest preserve. Or perhaps he was some kind of tramp? But gypsies were up to their ears in little gypsies. Or maybe he was some unknown little man whom nobody respected? But he had everything—had made himself all he wanted to be. He had a horse under his saddle and a whip in hand; people greeted him with deference. Then why were other men his age already celebrating their children's wedding—while he did what? Who was he without a son, without seed?

Aunt Bekai would also cry and fuss about for something with which to play up to her husband. She'd get out a hidden half-litre—and she herself would drink, out of sorrow. Time would pass and the bottle would empty steadily—until suddenly Orozkul would turn brutal and vent all his malice on her, his own wife. And she'd forgive everything. Grandfather forgave everything too. No one put ropes on Orozkul. By morning, he would be sobered up and his wife, although black and blue, would have set the samovar. Grandfather would already have fed and saddled his horse. Orozkul drank his fill of tea, sat on his horse—and again he was a big boss, master of all the San-Tash forests. And no one figured out that somebody like Orozkul should have been thrown into the river long ago.

It was dark now. Night had come to the cordon.

So ended the day when the lad was bought his first school briefcase.

Preparing for bed, he couldn't think of a place for the briefcase. Finally he put it next to himself at the head of the bed. The lad didn't yet know, he'd learn only later, that half his classmates would have exactly the same briefcase. But this wouldn't upset him in the slightest; his briefcase would remain extraordinary, an absolutely singular briefcase. He also didn't know that new events in his young life awaited him, that a day would come when he'd remain alone in the whole wide world, and only the briefcase would remain with him. The cause of all this would be his favourite tale about Horned Deer-Mother . . .

That evening he yearned to hear this tale again. Old Momun himself loved the story and always told it—sighing, crying, going silent and thinking his own thoughts—as if he himself had witnessed all of it.

However the lad decided not to disturb his grandfather. He understood that he wasn't up to telling tales. "We'll ask him some other time," the boy said to the briefcase. "But now I'll tell about Horned Deer-Mother myself, word for word, just as grandfather does. I'll tell everything so softly that nobody will hear us, but you listen. I like to tell and see everything like in a film. So listen carefully. Grandfather says that it's all true. It all happened . . ."

IV

IT TOOK PLACE long ago. Once upon a time, when the earth had more forest than grass and, where we live, more water than dry land, a Kirghiz tribe lived on the banks of a great, cold river. The river was named the Enesai. It flowed from where we are to very far away, in Siberia. It took three years and three months to gallop there on a horse. Now people call this river the Yenisei, but in those days it was called the Enesai. Which is the reason for this song:

Is there a river wider than you, Enesai,
Is there a land dearer than yours, Enesai?
Is there a sorrow deeper than yours, Enesai,
Is there a freedom freer than yours, Enesai?

No river is wider than you, Enesai,
No land is dearer than yours, Enesai.
No sorrow is deeper than yours, Enesai,
No freedom is freer than yours, Enesai.

That's the kind of river it was, the Enesai.

Many people lived on the Enesai in those days. Life was hard for them because they were constantly fighting. The Kirghiz tribe was surrounded by many enemies. First one of them attacked, then another, then the Kirghizians themselves went out to raid other tribes, steal their cattle, set fire to their tents, and kill people. They killed everybody they could—that's how it was in those times. Nobody cared about anybody else. Everybody annihilated everybody else. It got so bad that there was nobody to sow wheat, raise cattle or go hunting. It was easier to live by plundering: men would come, kill, and steal. And you had to pay for blood with even more blood; for vengeance, with even more vengeance. As time passed, more and more blood flowed. People were at their wits' end. There was nobody to make peace among the enemies. The man who was able to take his enemy by surprise was considered the wisest and best—who could slaughter another tribe to the last soul, and seize its cattle and riches.

Then a strange bird appeared in the taiga. She sang and wept all night until dawn in a mournful human voice, flying from one branch to another and repeating over and over: "Great grief will come. Great grief will come." Which is exactly what happened; that fearful day dawned.

On that day, the Kirghiz tribe on the Enesai was burying their old chief. *Batir** Kulche had been the tribe's leader for many years; he fought in many campaigns and wielded his sword and sabre in many battles. Although he had survived all the fierce fighting, the hour of his death struck. His tribesmen were in the deepest mourning for two days, and assembled on the third to commit the *batir*'s remains to the earth. According to the old custom, the leader's body was to be taken on its last journey down the banks of the Enesai and along the precipice and steeps, so that the soul of the deceased might take leave of the mother-river.

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* *Batir:* a Central Asian term for a great leader with knight-like qualities.

Because 'Ene' is 'mother', and 'sai' means river-bed. So that his soul could sing the song about the Enesai for the last time.

Is there a river wider than you, Enesai,
Is there a land dearer than yours, Enesai?
Is there a sorrow deeper than yours, Enesai,
Is there a freedom freer than yours, Enesai?

No river is wider than you, Enesai,
No land is dearer than yours, Enesai.
No sorrow is deeper than yours, Enesai,
No freedom is freer than yours, Enesai.

Having reached the funeral mound, it was the custom to raise the *batir* overhead at the open grave, to show him the four corners of the earth. "Here is your river, here is your sky. Here is your land, and here are we, who are descended from one root with you. We have all come to see you off. Sleep in peace." As a memorial for countless generations of the *batir*'s descendants, a boulder was placed on his grave.

On the day of the funeral, the *yurts* of the entire tribe were arranged in a row on the bank so that each family might take leave of the *batir* at their own threshold. The leave-taking was performed as the body was carried towards the grave. At each *yurt*, a white flag of mourning would be lowered to the ground amidst wailing and lamenting; then the entire procession would proceed to the next *yurt*, where weeping and bewailing would again resound as the white flag of mourning was lowered. This would continue to the very end of the journey, at the burial mound itself.

On the morning of that day, the sun had already commenced its daily journey when all the preparations were completed. Lances with horse-tails were set out on wooden pikestaffs and the *batir*'s armour, his shield and spear, was set out on display.

His horse was covered with a funeral blanket. The trumpeters prepared to sound their battle trumpets, the drummers to play their double-bass drums so that the taiga would shake. So that the birds would take wing in one flock to the heavens and circle about with a chorus of moans; so that the beasts would charge through the thickets, snorting savagely. So that the grasses would flatten themselves to the earth. So that the echo would rumble in the mountains and the mountains themselves shudder. The mourners let down their hair to sanctify *batir* Kulche with their tears. The *dzhigits* lowered themselves to one knee to raise the mortal remains on their powerful shoulders. Everyone was alert and ready, waiting for the *batir* to be borne out on his last journey. And at the forest's edge stood nine sacrificial mares on tethers, nine sacrificial bulls, and nine times nine sacrificial sheep for the funeral repast.

But then something totally unexpected happened. However hostile the peoples of the Enesai were towards each other, it was not customary to go to war with neighbours on the day of a leader's funeral. But at dawn, a horde of enemies had stealthily surrounded the Kirghiz encampment which was immersed in its sorrow. Now they charged from their cover on all sides so that no one had time to mount his horse, even pick up his weapon. A slaughter without parallel began. One after another, every last person was killed. This was precisely the enemy's scheme: to have done with the impudent Kirghiz tribe at a single blow. They killed one and all, so that no one would survive to remember the atrocity; no one to take vengeance. So that time would erase all traces of the past, like dry sand. All this happened—yet didn't . . .

A man takes a long time to be born and to grow up, but killing him is the quickest thing in the world. Many were already slashed to pieces and drowning in pools of blood; many plunged into the river to save themselves from the swords and

spears, but drowned in the Enesai's waves. And for miles up and down the bank and along the steeps and precipices, Kirghiz tents burned, embraced by roaring flames. No one managed to escape; no one survived. Everything was ravaged and burned to the ground. The bodies of the fallen were thrown from the crest atop the bank into the river. The enemy rejoiced in triumph. "Now these are our lands! Now these are our forests! Now these are our herds!"

The enemy withdrew with its rich booty and did not notice two children returning from the forest: a little boy and little girl. Disobedient and naughty, they had secretly sneaked away from their parents in the morning, entering the nearest forest to gather bark to make baskets. Absorbed in play, they did not notice how deep they had wandered into the core of the forest. But when they heard the din and shouts of the slaughter, they rushed back—to find neither their fathers nor mothers alive, neither their sisters nor their brothers. The children were left without kith or kin. They ran weeping from ruin to smouldering ruin—but not a soul survived anywhere. In a single hour they had become orphans. In the whole world, they alone survived. But a cloud of dust swirled in the distance, where the enemy was driving the flocks and herds seized in their gory raid towards their own lands.

The children saw the dust raised by hoofs and hurried in pursuit. Bathed in tears and calling loudly, they ran after the rabid enemy. Only children could have behaved that way: instead of hiding from the killers, they set out to overtake them. Anything not to remain alone, anything to get away from the cursed site of the massacre. Hand in hand, the little boy and little girl ran after the bandits' train begging for them to wait, to be taken with them. But who could hear their feeble voices amidst the din, neighing and thudding hoofs of the train's tempestuous homeward march?

For a long time, the boy and girl ran in desperation. But they never caught up. Finally they fell to the ground. They were terrified to look around them, terrified even to move. Horror gripped them. They pressed closer to one another and didn't notice that they had fallen asleep.

Not for nothing it's said that orphans have seven lives. The night passed safely. No animals fell on them, no forest creatures dragged them away. When they awoke, it was morning; the sun was shining and birds singing. The children got up and again dragged themselves along the trail of the enemy's column. They gathered berries and roots along the way. They walked and walked, and on the third day stopped on a mountain. They looked about, and down below, on a wide green meadow, a great feast and revel was taking place. *Yurt* beyond count had been set up there; camp fires beyond count were smoking; people beyond count were gathered around the camp fires. Young girls swung on swings and sang songs. Athletic warriors were performing for the crowd, circling for position and flinging one another to the ground. This is the way that the enemy was celebrating its victory.

Lacking the nerve to descend, the boy and girl stood on the mountain. But they yearned to find themselves around the camp fires where it smelled so deliciously of skewered meat, bread and wild onions.

Unable to hold out, the children began climbing down from the mountain. Amazed, the local tribesmen surrounded them in a mob.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"We're hungry," answered the boy and girl. "Give us something to eat."

The tribesmen guessed who they were by their speech, and this caused a great stir. They began to argue: should the surviving enemy seed be killed on the spot, or taken to the khan. While they argued, a certain tender-hearted woman managed to slip each of the children a piece of boiled horsemeat. Although dragged to the khan himself, they could not tear themselves away from their food. They were led to a tall red *yurt* which had guards with silver axes standing outside.

Meanwhile, the disturbing news that children of the Kirghiz tribe had somehow appeared from unknown places spread through the encampment. What could this mean? Everyone dropped his games, abandoned the feast, and ran in a huge crowd to the khan's tent. At that moment, the khan was sitting with his leading warriors in a state of solemnity on a great cushion of snow-white felt. He was drinking mare's milk sweetened with honey and listening to songs of praise. When the khan learned what had brought the crowds to him, he fell into a terrible fury. "How dare you disturb me? Can it be true that we did not exterminate the Kirghiz tribe? Haven't I made you masters of the Enesai forever? Why have you come running here, you cowardly mortals? Take a look at who stands before you! You there—Lame Pock-marked Old Woman," shouted the khan. And when a lame woman had stepped forward from the crowd, he gave her his orders. "Take them into the taiga, and make sure there that the Kirghiz tribe expires with them, that no trace of them remains, that its name is obliterated forever and ever. Be on your way, Lame Pock-marked Old Woman, do as I command . . ."

Lame Pock-marked Old Woman obeyed silently, taking the boy and girl by the hand and leading them away. They walked a great distance through the forest, emerging at last on a high crest over a bank of the Enesai. Here Lame Pock-marked Old Woman patted the little children and stood them side by side on the edge of the precipice. But before she pushed them down, she uttered:

"Oh great river Enesai. If a mountain were thrown into your depths, it would vanish like a stone. If a hundred-year pine tree were thrown, you would carry it away like a chip. Take into your waters two little grains of sand—two children of the human race. There is no place for them on earth. Is it for me to tell you why, Enesai? If the stars became people, there would not be enough sky for them. If fish became people, there would be too few rivers and seas. Is it for me to tell you why, Enesai? Take them and sweep them away. Let them leave our hateful world in their childhood, with pure souls and the conscience of younglings, unsullied by evil intentions and evil deeds. So that they will never know mankind's suffering and themselves will never bring torture to others. Take them, take them, great Enesai . . ."

The boy and girl sobbed and wept. What could an old woman's speeches mean to them when it was terrifying to glance down from the precipice? Far below, the waves surged violently.

"Embrace each other, my children, say farewell for the last time," said Lame Pock-marked Old Woman. She rolled up her sleeves, the easier to throw them from the precipice. "And now, forgive me, my children," she said. "This is what fate has decided, you understand. Although I am not doing this of my own will, still it is for your own good . . ."

Hardly had she said these words when a voice rang out from near by.

"Hold on, great wise woman, do not murder innocent children."

Lame Pock-marked Old Woman turned around, looked, and gave in to awe. Before her stood a doe: a great maral* dam. And what enormous eyes it had, now filled with reproach and sorrow. The doe herself was white like a young mother's first milk, and her belly was lined with a tannish fur as on a young camel. The horns were a work of beauty, spreading outward like boughs of autumn trees. And her udders were smooth and clean, like the breasts of a nursing mother.

*** Maral: a species of deer found principally in Siberia.**

"Who are you? Why do you speak in the language of men?" asked Lame Pock-marked Old Woman.

"I'm Deer-Mother," she answered. "And I spoke that way because otherwise you would not have understood me, and not heeded."

"What do you want, Deer-Mother?"

"Let the children go, great wise woman. I ask it of you: give them to me."

"What need have you of them?"

"People have killed my brood, two younglings. I'm trying to find children for myself."

"You want to rear them?"

"Yes, great wise woman."

"Have you thought carefully, Deer-Mother?" said Lame Pock-marked Old Woman with a laugh. "Remember, they are human children. They'll grow up and kill your own fawns."

"When they grow up, they will do no such thing as kill my fawns," the mother-maral answered. "I will be a mother to them, and they will be my children. Would they really do such a thing as kill their own brothers and sisters?"

"Oh don't you believe it, Deer-Mother—you don't know how people are." Lame Pock-marked Old Woman shook her head. "They're not like the creatures of the forest: they have no pity for one another. I'd give you the little orphans so that you yourself might learn that my words are true. But people would kill even these of your children. Why would you want so much grief?"

"I will take the children away to distant parts, where no one will find them. Have pity on the little ones, great wise woman; let them go. I will be a faithful mother to them. My udders are overflowing. My milk cries out for children. My milk begs for children."

"Well, well, if that's how it is," said Lame Pock-marked Old Woman, having made her decision. "Take them quickly and lead them away. Lead the orphans away to your distant parts. But if they die on the long journey, if they are killed by brigands who cross your path, if your human children repay you with black ingratitude—you have only yourself to blame."

Deer-Mother thanked Lame Pock-marked Old Woman. Then she spoke to the little boy and girl.

"Now I am your mother and you are my children. I will lead you to a distant land where, amidst snowy forested mountains, lies a hot sea—the Issik-Kul.

The boy and girl rejoiced and ran friskily after Horned Deer-Mother. But soon they grew tired and weak; and the journey was long—from one corner of the earth to the other. They would not have gone far had not Horned Deer-Mother nursed them with her milk and warmed them at night with her body. They travelled a great distance. Their old Enesai homeland was left farther and farther behind, but it was still very far to the new homeland on the Issik-Kul. Summer and winter, spring and summer, autumn and again summer and winter, again spring, again summer and autumn—during all these seasons they made their way across dense forests and burning steppes, through quicksand, over high mountains and across raging rivers. Packs of wolves pursued them, but placing the children on her back, Horned Deer-Mother saved them from the fierce animals. Hunters on horseback and with arrows chased them, crying, "The doe has stolen human children. Stop her! Catch her!"—and shot their arrows in pursuit. But from them too, from all unbidden rescuers, Horned Deer-Mother saved the children. She ran faster than the arrows, whispering simply: "Hold on tighter, my children. They're after us!"

At last Horned Deer-Mother delivered her children to the Issik-Kul. They stood on the mountain and marvelled. Snowy crests towered everywhere around them and amidst the mountains covered with green forests as far as the eye could see,

splashed and sparkled the great sea. White waves moved across the blue water; the wind whipped them from far behind and drove them far away. No one could tell where the Issik-Kul began and where it ended. The sun rose at one end while at the other it was still night. Mountains beyond count soared around the Issik-Kul, nor could one guess how many of the same snowy peaks stood beyond these mountains.

"This is your new homeland," said Horned Deer-Mother. "You will live here—will farm the earth, catch fish and raise cattle. You will live here in peace for a thousand years. Your kin will endure and multiply. And your descendants will not forget the tongue which you have brought here; let them take delight in talking and singing in their own language. Live as human beings should live. And I shall be with you and your children from now and forever . . ."

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

Time passed quickly. The boy became a strong man and the girl a mature woman. Then they were married and became man and wife. Horned Deer-Mother did not leave the Issik-Kul but lived in the neighbouring forests.

One day at dawn, the Issik-Kul suddenly ran high and made a great clamour. Labour had come to the woman; she was in pain. The man was frightened. He ran atop a cliff and began calling loudly.

"Where are you, Horned Deer-Mother? Do you hear the clamour the Issik-Kul is making? Your daughter is giving birth. Come quickly, Horned Deer-Mother—help us . . ."

Then a lilting peal was heard from afar, like the tinkling of a caravan bell. The pealing came closer and closer; finally Horned Deer-Mother ran into sight. She carried a child's cradle on her horns, hooked under its arch—a *beshik*. The *beshik* was made of white birchwood, and a silver bell jingled on its arch. To this day, that bell jingles on Issik-Kul *beshiks*.

Mothers rock their cradles and the silver bell tinkles, as if Horned Deer-Mother is running up from afar, hastening to bring a birch cradle on her horns . . .

The moment Horned Deer-Mother appeared to answer the call for her the woman gave birth.

"This *beshik* is for your first-born," said Horned Deer-Mother. "You will have many children—seven sons and seven daughters."

The mother and father rejoiced. They named their first-born in honour of Horned Deer-Mother—Bugubai. Bugubai grew up, took a beauty from the Kipchak tribe as his bride, and the Bugu clan—the clan of Horned Deer-Mother—began to multiply. The Bugu clan became great and strong on the Issik-Kul. The Buguans revered Horned Deer-Mother as their goddess. An emblem was embroidered at the entrance to Buguan *yurts*: maral horns, so that it would be seen from afar that the *yurt* belonged to the Bugu clan. When the Buguans repulsed enemy raids and competed in games on horseback, the war cry "To Bugu" resounded—and they emerged victorious. In those days, white, horned marals roamed the Issik-Kul forests, and the stars in the sky envied their beauty. They were Horned Deer-Mother's offspring. No one disturbed them; no one allowed them to be hurt. At the sight of a maral, the Buguans dismounted and made way for her. They compared the beauty of their favourite young girls with the white marals' beauty . . .

This was how life went on until the death of a very rich, very famous Buguan—he had had a thousand thousand sheep and a thousand thousand horses, and everyone near by had served as his shepherd. His sons organised a great funeral feast for him, inviting the most celebrated people from all corners of the earth to his feast. They set up a thousand and one hundred *yurts* for the guests on the shore of the Issik-Kul. No one could count how many cattle were slaughtered, how much mare's milk was drunk, how many kashgar sweets* were served. The sons of the rich man carried themselves with an air of great importance: people should know what rich and generous heirs survived the dead man, how they respected him and cherished his memory . . . ("Beware, my son, it's a bad sign when people make a display not of wisdom but of wealth!")

The bards, riding about on thoroughbred horses that the sons of the deceased had given them and showing off in sable hats and silk gowns, also provided for them, vied with each other to praise the deceased and his heirs.

"Where else under the sun can you see such a happy life, such a luxurious feast?" sang one.

"From the day of the earth's creation, nothing like this has taken place!" sang a second.

"No one else but we revere our parents, render homage to our parents' honour and glory, cherish their sacred names," sang a third.

"Hey you gas-bags, what are you chirping about here? Do you really think that words worthy of these bounties exist? Are there any words equal to the deceased's glory?" sang a fourth . . .

Thus they competed day and night. ("Beware, my son, it's a bad sign when bards compete in this kind of eulogising. Singers turn into enemies of song.")

The memorable funeral feast was celebrated for many days, each like a holiday. The rich man's conceited sons wanted dearly to outshine all others and surpass everyone else on earth, so that word of them would spread through the entire world. And they thought to mount a maral's horns on the tomb of their father, so that everyone would know that this was the final resting place of their renowned ancestor of the clan of Horned Deer-Mother. ("Beware, my son: as long ago as

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*** Kashgar sweet: named after the Chinese city of Kashgar, this is one of the 'eastern sweets' popular in Central Asia.**

ancient times, people said that wealth breeds arrogance—and arrogance, recklessness.")

Once the sons of the plutocrat felt the wish to bestow this unheard-of honour upon their father's memory, nothing held them back. It was no sooner said than done. They dispatched hunters, and the hunters slew a maral and felled her horns. The horns were magnificent, like the wings of an eagle taking flight. The sons were duly pleased with the maral's horns, each of which had eighteen shoots—meaning the deer had lived eighteen years. Fine work! They ordered craftsmen to mount the horns on the tomb.

Old men at the feast were indignant.

"By what right did they kill a maral? Who dared raise his hand to the offspring of Horned Deer-Mother?"

The heirs of the rich man answered.

"The maral was killed on our territory. And everything that walks, crawls and flies in our domain, from flies to camels, is ours. We know how to deal with our own possessions. Be off with you."

Servants beat the old men with lashes, mounted them backwards on horses and banished them in disgrace.

It all began with this. Great misfortune befell the progeny of Horned Deer-Mother. Almost everyone began hunting white marals in the forests. Every Buguan considered it his duty to mount maral horns on the graves of his ancestors. Now this practice was regarded as something virtuous, as a token of special respect to the memory of the dead. Those who couldn't lay hands on horns were now considered unworthy. A trade in maral horns sprang up, and they were laid in store. People emerged from the clan of Horned Deer-Mother who made their craft acquiring maral horns and selling them for money. ("Beware, my son, where money rules, there is no place for a kind word, no place for beauty.")

Dark days befell the marals of the Issik-Kul forests. They were shown no mercy. The marals took refuge in inaccessible cliffs, but were hunted down even there. Packs of hound dogs were let loose upon them, driving the marals into the ambush of hunters, who felled them with rarely a miss. Marals were killed in entire herds; they were flushed out in whole stands. Bets were laid as to who would get the horns with the most shoots.

Finally, no marals remained. The mountains had been emptied. Not at midnight nor at dawn could a maral be heard. Not in forest nor glade could one be seen grazing, galloping, tossing his horns on his back or leaping over a crevasse, like a bird in flight. People were born who would never see a maral during their entire lives. They only heard fairy-tales about them—yes, and saw horns on tombs.

And what happened to Horned Deer-Mother?

She was deeply hurt and took grave offence against people. It was said that when bullets and hound dogs had made life impossible for the marals, when maral had become so few that you could easily count them on your fingers, Horned Deer-Mother mounted the very highest mountain peak, bade farewell to the Issik-Kul and led her last children across a great pass, to another land and other mountains.

These are the kind of things that can happen on earth. This is the full tale—believe it if you want to; if not, don't.

When Horned Deer-Mother left, she said that it was never to return . . .