

## VI

**H**E WAS FEVERISH too when he got into bed. For a long time, he couldn't fall asleep. Black night already reigned in the yard. His head ached. But the boy said nothing. No one knew that he had fallen ill. He was forgotten.

And there was much to make him so.

Grandfather was wholly confused and did not know what to do with himself. He would go outside, come in again, sit down for a minute, sighing heavily and grieving; then stand up and wander out again. Old grandma growled spitefully at the old man and also tramped back and forth, going out into the yard from time to time and returning. Curt, indistinct voices of some kind sounded in the yard, someone's hurried steps and someone's cursing—apparently Orozkul was swearing again. Someone was sobbing . . .

The lad lay still, growing more and more tired of the voices and steps, of everything he heard in the house and the yard.

He shut his eyes and, soothing his own loneliness and forlornness, remembered what had happened today, what he wished to see. He stood on the bank of the great river. The river

flowed so swiftly that you couldn't look at it for long because your head swam. The marals gazed at him from the other bank. All three marals which he'd seen towards evening now stood there again. And everything was repeated again. The same drops fell into the shallow back-current from the muzzle of the big stag when he tossed his head up from the water. And Horned Deer-Mother kept staring intently at the lad with her kind, understanding eyes, just as before. Her eyes were huge, dark and moist. The lad was utterly amazed that Horned Deer-Mother could sigh just like a person. Full of sadness and grief, like grandfather. Then they departed through the foliage of the lower forest. Auburn branches swung over them and red leaves drifted down upon their smooth, resilient backs. They climbed up to the precipice and stopped there. The big maral stretched his neck and, tossing his horns upward onto his back, thundered like a trumpet: "Ba-o, ba-o!" Remembering how the big maral's cry had rumbled over the river in a long echo, the lad smiled to himself. After this, the marals took cover in the forest. But not wanting to lose them, the lad began to picture in his mind's eye what he wished to see.

And once again the big swift river flowed headlong before him. His head swam from the speed of its current. He made a leap, then flew across the river. Gently and smoothly, he crouched down not far from the marals, who continued to stand there on the pebble-bank. Horned Deer-Mother called him to her.

"Who's boy are you?"

The lad was silent; he was ashamed to say who his parents were.

"Grandfather and I love you very much, Horned Deer-Mother," he uttered. "We've been waiting for you a long, long time."

"And I know who you are. I know your grandfather too. He's a good man," said Horned Deer-Mother.

The lad filled with happiness, but didn't know how to thank her.

"If you want," he said suddenly, "I'll become a fish and swim down the river into the Issik-Kul to the white steamship."

He could do this. But Horned Deer-Mother didn't respond to the offer. Then the lad began to undress and, as in summer, went into the water, all huddled up and gripping the branch of the rose willow on the bank. However, the water turned out not to be icy but hot, burning and stifling. His eyes open, he swam under water, and myriads of golden grains of sand and tiny underwater stones spun around him like a buzzing swarm. He began to suffocate, but the hot stream kept pulling him further and further.

"Help, Horned Deer-Mother, help me," he shouted loudly. "I'm your son too, Horned Deer-Mother."

Horned Deer-Mother ran after him along the bank. She ran swiftly and the wind whistled in her horns.

The lad pushed away his blanket. He felt better immediately. He was wet with sweat, but remembering that in such cases grandfather wrapped him up even more warmly, he covered himself again more tightly. No one was in the house. The wick in the lamp had already burned down, making it burn dully. The lad wanted to get up for a drink, but sharp voices of some kind again resounded from the yard: somebody was shouting at someone, somebody was crying and someone was trying to offer comfort and calm. You could hear the commotion and the tramp of feet. Then two people tramped by right under the window, oohing and aahing as if one were dragging the other. The door swung open with a great noise and old grandma, breathing heavily in a white rage, literally shoved grandfather Momun into the house. The lad had never seen his grandfather so terrified. It seemed as if he had lost control of his senses. The old man's eyes wandered in confusion. Old grandma pushed him in the chest and made him sit down.

"Sit down, *sit*, you old fool. And don't poke your nose where it's not wanted. What is this, the first time they're at it? If you want things to work out, sit down and don't butt in. Do what I tell you, you hear me? Otherwise he'll hound us to death, you understand? Hound us off the face of the earth. And where are we supposed to go in our old age? Where?" With these words, old grandma slammed the door and hurried away again.

Once more it was quiet in the house. Only grandfather's hoarse, broken breathing could be heard. He sat on the step to the stove, hugging his head with trembling hands. Suddenly the old man fell to his knees and, raising up his arms, he groaned. Whom he appealed to was not known.

"Take me, receive me, wretched as I am. Only give her a child. I can't bear to look at her. Give her at least one, just a one and only—have pity on us . . ."

Crying and staggering, the old man rose and, clutching the walls, fumbled for the door. He stepped from the house, pulled the door partially shut after him and, behind the door, wept hollowly, squeezing his mouth shut.

The lad felt very bad. He was feverish again. Waves of heat and cold swept over him. He wanted to get up and go to grandfather, but his arms and legs did not obey and his head was filled with ache. Behind the door, the old man wept, and in the yard, drunken Orozkul was again raging while Aunt Bekai wailed desperately and the voice of Guljamal and old grandma tried to implore and persuade them both.

The lad left them for his imaginary world.

Once again he was on the bank of the swift river, and the same marals stood on the pebble-bank at the other side. The lad began to implore. "Horned Deer-Mother, bring Aunt Bekai a cradle on your horns. I beg you, bring them a cradle. Let them have a child." And he ran across the water to Horned Deer-Mother.

The water did not give way under his feet, but he came no closer to the other bank nevertheless, as if he were running in place. All the while, he kept begging and entreating Horned Deer-Mother. "Bring them a cradle on your horns. Make it so that our grandfather won't cry, so that Uncle Orozkul won't beat Aunt Bekai. Make them have a baby. I'll love them all, I'll love Uncle Orozkul too—only give him his child. Bring them a cradle on your horns . . ."

The boy seemed to hear a bell ringing in the distance—ringing more and more clearly. It was Horned Deer-Mother running through the mountains and carrying a small cradle on her horns, hooked under its arch—a birch *beshik* with a tiny bell. The cradle-bell jingled merrily. Horned Deer-Mother made great haste, and the little bell sounded closer and closer.

But what was this? The distant rumble of an engine joined the ringing of the little bell. A lorry was on the move somewhere. The vehicle's drone grew steadily stronger and more distinct while the little bell grew shy. Now its tinkling could be heard only irregularly, and it was finally lost in the engine's roar.

The lad heard the heavy lorry enter the yard, its metal parts rumbling against one another. All barks, the dog rushed into the yard. For a moment, the reflection of the headlights fluttered onto the window, then quickly went out. The engine too was switched off and the cab doors slammed shut. Talking among themselves, the men who'd arrived—three or so, judging by their voices—passed under the window behind which lay the lad.

"Seidakhmat's arrived," sounded Guljamal's joyful voice suddenly, and she could be heard hurrying to her husband. "We've been waiting for ages."

"Good evening," she was answered by strangers.

"How's everything here?" asked Seidakhmat.

"Not bad, we got along somehow. What took you so long?"

"And I'm lucky at that," Seidakhmat explained. "I made it to the state farm and waited forever for something moving in my direction. To Jclesai, at least. Just then these men were driving up to us for the timber . . . It's dark driving down that canyon. You know the road yourself . . ."

"Where's Orozkul?" asked one of the strangers. "At home?"

"At home," Guljamal answered uncertainly. "He's a bit under the weather. But don't worry about a thing. You can spend the night with us—we've got room. C'mon."

They moved off, but stopped after several steps.

"Good evening, *Aksakal*. Good evening, *Baibiche*."\*

The newcomers greeted grandfather Momun and old grandma—who must have been ashamed by the newcomers for they should have greeted them in the yard, as outsiders are meant to be met. Maybe Orozkul would also be ashamed. If only he didn't disgrace himself and the others.

The lad calmed down somewhat and, in general, felt a bit better. The ache in his head was less severe. He even considered whether he should get up and have a look at the lorry. What kind was it, a four- or six-wheeler? New or old? And what kind of trailer did it have? Once last spring a real army lorry visited them on the cordon—it had tall wheels and a snub nose, as if somebody had cut off its snout. Its young driver, a soldier, let the lad sit in the cab—that was wonderful! And an officer with golden shoulder-straps went into the forest with Orozkul. What was it all about? Nothing like that had ever happened before.

"What's this about—arc you chasing down a spy?" the lad asked the soldier. He grinned.

"Yeah, we're hunting a spy."

"We haven't had a single spy come our way so far," the lad breathed sadly.

The soldier burst out laughing.

\* *Aksakal* and *Baibiche*: terms of respect for elderly men and women.

"What do you need a spy for?"

"I'd chase after him and catch him."

"My my, you're a nimble little fellow. But you're still small, you'd better grow up first."

While the officer with the golden shoulder-straps tramped in the forest with Orozkul, the lad and the driver warmed to their conversation.

"I love all lorries and all drivers," said the lad.

"And why is that?" the soldier asked.

"Lorries are good—strong and fast. Then they smell good, of petrol. And drivers: they're all young and all children of Horned Deer-Mother."

"What? What's that?" The soldier did not understand. "Who's that horned mother?"

"You really don't know?"

"No. I never heard of such a marvel."

"Then where do you come from?"

"I'm from Karaganda—a Cossack. I studied in a mining school."

"No, I mean whose son are you?"

"My father's. And mother's."

"And whose are they?"

"Also their fathers' and mothers'."

"And they?"

"Listen, you can keep on asking that forever."

"I'm the son of Horned Deer-Mother's sons."

"Who told you that?"

"Grandfather."

"Something's a bit funny somewhere," said the soldier shaking his head doubtfully.

He was intrigued by this large-headed boy with the protruding ears, the son of Horned Deer-Mother's sons. However the soldier was somewhat embarrassed when it was revealed that he not only didn't know where his clan had begun, but

didn't even know the obligatory seven generations in his family tree. The soldier knew only his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. And beyond that?

"Didn't they teach you to remember the names of your seven ancestors?" the boy asked.

"No, they didn't. And what for? So I don't know—nothing's come of it. I've managed to live without it."

"Grandfather said that if people don't remember their fathers, they'll turn bad."

"Who'll turn bad? People?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Grandfather says that if this happens, nobody will be ashamed of the bad things they do. Because their children and their children's children won't remember him. And nobody will do good things. Because all the same, his children won't know about them."

"That's some grandfather you have," said the soldier with genuine wonder. "A very interesting grandfather. Only he stuffs your head with all kinds of rubbish. You're a big-headed fellow, after all—and you've got ears on you like our radar on the firing range. Don't you listen to him. We're marching to Communism, we're flying in space—and what's he teaching you? He ought to sit in on our political instruction sessions, we'd wisen him up in a wink. And you, you'll grow up some day, learn how things are—and see that you clear away from your grandfather. He's an ignorant one, backward."

"No, I'll never leave grandfather," the boy objected. "He's a good man."

"Okay, that's all right for now. You'll understand later."

Now, straining to hear the voices, the lad remembered the army lorry and how he wasn't able to make the soldier understand why local drivers, at least the ones he knew, were considered sons of Horned Deer-Mother.

The lad had told him the truth. There'd been nothing fabricated in his words. Last year, precisely at this time of autumn—or, it seemed, a bit later—the state farm's lorries drove up into the mountains to fetch the hay. They didn't come past the cordon, but just before reaching it, turned down the road into the Archa hollow. Then they drove up to where the hay had been mowed during the summer, so as to deliver it to the state farm in the autumn. Hearing a roar of engines like never before on Guard Mountain, the lad ran down to the fork. So many lorries all together! One after another—a whole column. He counted something like fifteen.

The weather was just about to break, any day now heavy snow would fall—and then 'goodbye hay until next year'. In this region, if you didn't get in the hay on time, you might as well forget about it. You couldn't drive through later. Evidently they'd dawdled with various jobs on the state farm and now that time was pressing, decided to bring in the waiting hay with all the lorries in one go. But it didn't work out . . .

However the lad knew nothing of this—and, actually, what business was it of his? Full of excitement and happiness, he simply ran towards each lorry, raced alongside it briefly, then ran towards the next one. The lorries rolled on, all of them new, with handsome cabs and wide windscreens. Young *dzhigits* sat in the cabs, sometimes two to a cab, all beardless and splendid specimens. The pairs had come to pack and load the hay. To the lad, they all seemed handsome, gallant and gay.

And generally speaking, he wasn't mistaken; that's the way it actually was. The young men's lorries were in good condition and travelled fast, passing the slope from Guard Mountain along the hard, rocky road. The young drivers were in a fine mood; the weather wasn't bad and on top of everything, a large-headed, large-eared whelp of a boy had appeared out of nowhere to run towards every lorry, bubbling over with wild delight. How could they keep from grinning at him and

tossing him a wave—or sending him a little joking threat to make him even happier and more mischievous . . .

The very last lorry even stopped. A young fellow in army clothes—a field-jacket without its shoulder-straps and in an ordinary cap instead of a uniform one—peered out of the cab. He was the driver.

"Hi<sup>4</sup> there, what are you doing here, eh?" He winked amiably to the little shaver.

"Just like that," answered the lad, not without a trace of fluster.

"You're grandfather Momun's grandson?"

"Yes."

"I knew it. I'm a Buguan too, you know. And all these fellows—they're all Buguans. We hit the road for the hay. Nowadays Buguans don't know each other, we're all scattered around . . . Say hello to your grandfather. Tell him that you saw Kulubek—Chotbai's son Kulubek. Tell him Kulubek's come back from the army and he's a driver on the state farm now. Well, so long now." And as a farewell gift, he gave the lad some kind of extremely interesting army emblem which looked like a medal.

The lorry growled like a wildcat and tore away, catching up with its mates. The lad suddenly yearned deeply to go off with that friendly, dashing fellow in the field-jacket, his brother-Buguan. But the road had already emptied and he could do nothing better than return home. He returned a proud boy, however, and told his grandfather about the encounter. The emblem was pinned to his chest.

Towards evening of that same day, the San-Tash wind suddenly struck from up high on the mountain ridge which reached the sky. It whipped up into a tornado. Leaves whizzed into a column above the forest and, rising higher and higher towards the sky, whirled over the mountains with a rumble. In a flash, a tempest was swirling so that you couldn't open your

eyes. Snow followed immediately. A white host burst forth upon the land, the forest swayed and the river seethed. And the snow poured down; the blizzard raged.

Somehow, they managed to drive in the cattle and take in a few things from the yard; somehow they were able to carry an extra supply of firewood into the house. After this, no one poked his nose outside the house. Not for anything in the world in such an early but fearful storm.

"What can it mean?" wondered a worried grandfather Momun as he kindled the stove. He kept listening to the whistle of the wind, now and then going to the window. Outside, a haze of swirling snow was quickly thickening.

"Sit down where you belong," grumbled old grandma. "What is this, the first time we've had it? 'What can it mean, oh what?'" she mimicked. "It means that winter's come."

"So suddenly, just like that? In one day . . ."

"And why not? I suppose you should have been asked about it. Winter felt like it, so she came."

The chimney howled. At first the lad felt frightened and the cold went right through him while he was helping his grandfather with the chores. But soon the wood caught fire and it became warm; the house smelled of hot resin and the smoke of pine, and the lad calmed down while warming his bones.

They had supper, then went to bed. Meanwhile, the snow kept rushing down outside in swirls and the wind blew ferociously.

"It's probably really scary in the forest," thought the lad listening to the sounds outside the window. He felt uneasy when the sounds of muffled voices suddenly issued forth—some kind of shouts. Someone was calling somebody else and someone was answering. At first the lad decided that it was his imagination. Who could possibly have come to the cordon in these conditions? But grandfather Momun and old grandma also pricked up their ears.

"Someone's there," said old grandma.

"Yes," answered the old man uncertainly. Then he began to worry—who could it be at that hour?—and started dressing himself hurriedly.

Old grandma also hurried. She got up and lit the lamps. Fearful of something, the lad, too, quickly put on his clothes. Meanwhile, the people approached the house—many voices and many feet. Crunching the fresh snow under their boots, the strangers thudded across the veranda and banged at the door.

"Open up, *Aksakal*. We're frozen."

"Who are you?"

"Friends."

Momun opened the door. Together with currents of cold, wind and snow, the same drivers who'd driven past during the day to the Archa plateau for hay burst into the house, plastered with snow. The lad recognized them immediately. Kulubek too, in his field-jacket—the one who'd given him the military emblem. They were helping one of their number, supporting him by the arms; he groaned and dragged his leg. The house flew into a flurry instantly.

"*Astapralla!*\* What's happened to you?" wailed grandfather Momun and old grandma in one voice.

"We'll explain later. More of our group are coming, about seven men. They can easily lose the road. Come on, sit you down over here. Twisted his leg," said Kulubek quickly, seating his groaning mate on the step leading to the stove.

"Where are they, your others?" asked grandfather Momun impatiently. "I'll go out there and lead them in. And you run over," he said to the lad. "Tell Seidakhmat to get himself here quickly with the torch, the electric one."

The lad dashed out of the house and choked in the storm. He remembered that terrible moment until the end of his life. A kind of shaggy, cold, shrieking monster grabbed him by the

\* *Astapralla*: 'God save us' in Kirghizian.

throat and began to shake him. But he didn't flinch. He broke free of the clutching claws and ran to Seidakhmat's house, protecting his head with his hands.

His route took him only twenty or thirty steps in all, but it seemed to him that he ran a great distance through the storm, like a chieftain to the rescue of his warriors. His heart filled with valour and determination. To himself, he seemed mighty and invincible, and before he reached Seidakhmat's house, he'd had time to achieve breathtakingly heroic feats. He leapt across chasms from mountain to mountain, struck down legions of enemies with his sword, and saved people drowning in rivers and burning in fires. In a jet fighter with a red banner streaming in the wind, he chased after the shaggy black monster and evaded him through canyons and cliffs. His jet fighter raced like a bullet in pursuit of the monster. The lad pumped machine-gun fire at him and shouted, "Crush the fascists!" And in all of this, Horned Deer-Mother was present. She was proud of him. As the lad was approaching the door of Seidakhmat's house at last, Horned Deer-Mother spoke to him. "Now go save my sons, the young drivers."

"I'll save them, Horned Deer-Mother, I swear it to you," said the lad aloud, and banged at the door.

"Hurry up, Uncle Seidakhmat. Let's get started to save our people." He spat out these words in a way that made both Seidakhmat and Guljamal recoil in fright.

"Save who? What happened?"

"Grandfather said we should run back with the torch, the electric one. The drivers from the state farm have got lost."

"Idiot," Seidakhmat scolded him. "Why didn't you say so?" And he scrambled to get ready.

But this didn't offend the lad in the least. How could Seidakhmat have known what feats he'd achieved to reach the house, or what oaths he'd uttered? Neither was the lad greatly bothered when he learned that grandfather Momun had met

the seven drivers just outside the cordon and escorted them home. Because it all might have turned out very differently! Danger seems slight when danger has passed . . . In short, these men too were found. Seidakhmat took them home. Even Orozkul took in about five drivers for the night—he too had to wake up. All the others crowded into grandfather Momun's house.

The blizzard in the mountains did not subside. The lad would run out onto the veranda and in a minute couldn't distinguish where right was and where left, where up and where down. The stormy night whirled and raved. Snow piled up to knee depth.

Only now, after all the drivers had been found and thawed themselves out, after they'd recovered from their fear and the cold, did grandfather Momun cautiously pump them to find out what had happened, although it was clear that the blizzard had caught them on the road. While the young men described their ordeal, the old man and old grandma sighed.

"Oi, oi, yow!" They marvelled over what had happened and, pressing their hands to their chests, thanked God.

"You're dressed so lightly, you boys," reproached old grandma, pouring some hot tea. "How can you think of coming to the mountains in such flimsy duds? You're still kids, just kids. Showing off all the time—you want to take after city-folk. What if you'd been lost right through until morning, God forbid? You'd have frozen solid, like icicles."

"Who knew something like this would happen?" answered Kulubek. "Why should we dress warmly? If the worst comes to the worst, our lorries can always be heated from inside. You can sit there like at home. Spin the wheel around for amusement. Look at the height they fly at in planes—these mountains are no more than little hills from up above. Forty degrees below zero outside, and inside people sit around in their shirts . . ."

The lad lay on a sheepskin among the drivers. He snuggled close to Kulubek and was all ears to the grown-ups' conversation. No one guessed that he was even glad that a blizzard like this had blown up suddenly, forcing these fine young fellows to seek shelter with them in the cordon. Secretly, he set his heart on the blizzard not dying down for many days, at least three or so. Then they could live with them. It was so good when they were there, so interesting. It turned out that grandfather knew them all—if not the young men themselves, their fathers and mothers.

"There you are," said grandfather to his grandson with a faint note of pride. "You've met up with your brother-Buguan. Now you know what kind of brothers you have. That kind right there. Oh today's *dzhigits* are strapping, all right. God grant them good health. I remember the winter of '42 when they drove us out to Magnitogorsk, down to the construction site..."

And grandfather fell to telling the story, well known to the lad, of how they, the labour-soldiers who'd been transported there from various corners of the country, were set out in a long, long line according to height. It turned out that the Kirghizians were almost all at the very end: they were stunted. A roll call was taken, after which they had a smoke break. Some rangy fellow, red-headed and sturdy, approached them and started talking loudly.

"And where did these kind come from? Manchurians?"

Among them was an old teacher who answered.

"We're Kirghizians. And when we fought with the Manchurians not far from here, there wasn't even a mention of Magnitogorsk.\* We were about as tall as you are then. Now we'll finish this war and grow some again."

Grandfather reminisced about this ancient incident. Chuckling and pleased, he glanced again at his house guests.

\* The city became important in the eighteenth century on the basis of ore and coal deposits near by.

"That teacher turned out to be right. When I'm in the city or on the road, I look around: we've become a tall, handsome people. Nothing like the old days..."

The young drivers smiled understandingly; the old man liked to produce whimsical talk.

"We're tall, all right," said one of them. "But a lorry crashed down a slope out there. And all of us together didn't have enough in us to..."

"What did you expect, loaded down with hay and in this kind of blizzard?" said grandfather Momun in justification. "Things like that happen. God willing, it'll all be put straight tomorrow. The main thing is that the wind lets up."

The young drivers told grandfather how they'd driven up to the Archa's highest hayfields. Three large ricks of mountain hay were waiting there, and they began to load up all three simultaneously. They packed the loads high, higher than a house, so that they had to let themselves down on ropes afterwards. They loaded lorry after lorry in this fashion. You couldn't see the cabs, only windscreens, bonnets and wheels. Once they'd made the trip, they wanted to get in the whole lot so they wouldn't have to return. They knew that any hay left over would have to remain there until the following year. They worked hard, fast and well. When a driver's lorry was ready, he pulled over to the side and helped load the next one. They had packed on almost all the hay; not more than two loads were left. They had a smoke, agreed as to who would lead whom on the return trip, and all drove off together in a column. Driving cautiously—almost groping their way—they descended from the mountain. Hay isn't a heavy load, but cumbersome and even dangerous, especially on narrow roads and sharp turns.

They drove on, not suspecting what lay in store for them ahead.

They descended from the plateau of the Archa, drove down



the straits of the canyon, and as they were leaving the canyon— it was nearing evening now—were met by the tornado and the snow.

“It made your spine all sweaty, what started up there,” Kulubek recounted. “Darkness all at once and a wind that ripped the wheel out of your hands. You were scared that your lorry would topple over any second. And on top of this, the road’s dangerous even in daylight . . .”

Holding his breath, the lad listened. He lay stock-still, not removing his shining eyes from Kulubek. Meanwhile, the same wind and snow about which they were talking raged outside the window. Many drivers and loaders were already asleep side by side on the floor, still in their boots. And now all they’d endured was once again experienced by this big-headed lad with the thin neck and protruding ears.

Within minutes, the road became invisible. Like blind men following their leader, the lorries clung to one another, blowing their horns continuously so that none would drop behind. The snow fell like a wall; the headlights were lost in it and the windscreen wipers couldn’t cope with the ice on the glass. The drivers had to press on by leaning out of their cabs—but can that be called driving?

The snow kept falling and falling. The wheels began to skid. The column came to a stop before a sharp rise where the engines raced as if mad—but all in vain. By this time, the lorries couldn’t force their way upwards. The drivers climbed down from their cabs and, calling to each other and rushing from lorry to lorry, gathered at the head of the column. What to do? It was impossible to build a fire. To wait in the cabs would be to burn up the remaining petrol, which even now was hardly enough to get them back to the state farm. And if they didn’t heat the cabs, they could quite easily freeze. The young men were lost for a solution. All-powerful technology had been rendered powerless. What could they do? Someone

suggested tossing down the hay from one of the lorries so that everyone could bury himself in it. But it was clear that the minute a load was undone, not a wisp of hay would be left: the blizzard would whip it away before you could blink your eyes. Meanwhile, the lorries were being snowed under even more completely and drifts were already piling up over the wheels. Now the young men lost their heads completely and began to go icy in the wind.

“And suddenly I remembered, *Aksakal*,” said Kulubek to grandfather Momun, “that when we were driving up to the Archa I met this one over here, our young brother-Buguan.” He nodded towards the lad and patted him affectionately on the head. “He was running around on the road out there. I stopped—of course I did—and said hello. We had a little talk, isn’t that right? Why aren’t you asleep?”

Smiling, the lad nodded his head. If only anyone knew how violently his heart was thumping from pride and joy. Kulubek himself was talking about him. The strongest, bravest and handsomest of the whole group. How he’d love to grow up like him!

Grandfather praised him too while shoving a log into the fire.

“That’s the kind our boy is. He likes to listen to people’s talk. Look at that, how he’s drinking in every little thing.”

“How I remembered him at that moment,” continued Kulubek, “I myself don’t know. So I told my mates—shouted, practically, because the wind drowned out everything. ‘Let’s go,’ I said, ‘let’s try to make it to the cordon. Otherwise we’ll be finished here.’ ‘But how?’ the others shouted in my face. ‘We can’t get there on foot. And we can’t abandon the lorries.’ So I said to them: ‘Let’s push the lorries up onto the mountain, and from there the road runs downhill. We’ve only got to get to the San-Tash canyon,’ I said, ‘and from there we can make it on foot to our foresters because it’s not far at all.’

The lads saw the point. Okay, they said, you take command. Well, since it'd worked out that way . . . We started with the lead lorry. 'Up you go, Osmonali, climb into your cab!' Then all of us, to the very last man, heaved at the lorry with our shoulders. And moved off! At first we seemed to make some progress. Then we ran out of strength. And couldn't retreat, either. Then it seemed we weren't hauling a lorry but a whole mountain. What a load!—a rick on wheels. I only know that I shouted with everything I had. 'Let's go, let's go, let's go.' But I couldn't even hear myself. The wind, the snow—you couldn't see a thing. The lorry howled and cried like it was alive. It inched forward with its last ounce of strength. And we too. It felt like your heart would burst and fly away in little pieces. We felt giddy in the head."

"Oi, oi, oi," said grandfather Momun in distress. "What you had to cope with! But somehow, I suppose, Horned Deer-Mother herself came to the aid of her children. She saw to the rescue. If it weren't for her, who knows? . . . Do you hear that? It's not calming down out there at all, everything's still whirling and storming."

The lad could hardly keep his eyes open. He forced himself to stay awake, but his lids fell shut again. Half asleep, listening to snatches of the conversation between the old man and Kulubek, he fused reality with his imaginary scenes. It seemed to him that he too was there, among the young drivers stranded by the blizzard in the mountains. Before his gaze stretched a twisting road leading up to the whitest of white snow-covered mountains. The storm burned his cheeks. His eyes stung. They were pushing a huge lorry upwards, as big as a house and filled with hay. They made their way up the road very very slowly. Then the lorry went no farther, but gave up and shuddered backwards. It was awful. Frightfully dark. The wind was terribly scalding. The lad shrivelled with fear, sensing that the lorry would break loose and crush them. But now Horned

Deer-Mother appeared from nowhere. She braced her horns against the lorry and began to help them push it upwards. "Let's go, let's go, let's go," shouted the lad. And the lorry moved—actually moved. They pushed it up to the mountain, from where it ran down on its own. Then they shoved up a second lorry and a third and many, many more—each time helped by Horned Deer-Mother. No one saw her. No one knew she was there, by their side. But the lad saw and knew. He noticed that every time it became unbearably hard, when their strength was exhausted and it had turned dangerous and frightening, Horned Deer-Mother ran up and helped them roll the lorry upwards with her horns. "Let's go, let's go, let's go," the lad joined in. And all the while, he was alongside Kulubek. Then Kulubek told him: "Get behind the wheel." The lad mounted the cab. The lorry shook and droned. The wheel spun by itself in the lad's hands—freely, like a barrel hoop with which he'd played car when he was still a toddler. The lad felt ashamed that his wheel had turned out like that, toy-like. Suddenly the lorry began to careen and fall on its side, then rolled over with a crash and broke into pieces. The lad began to sob loudly. He was terribly ashamed. Ashamed to look into Kulubek's eyes.

"What's the matter with you? What's the trouble, eh?" Kulubek woke him.

The lad opened his eyes and felt a surge of happiness that it had all turned out to be a dream. Kulubek lifted him in his arms and hugged him.

"Were you dreaming? Did you get scared? What a hero you are." He kissed the lad with his chapped, windbitten lips. "Let's go, I'll put you to bed. It's time you were asleep."

He laid the lad down on a cushion on the floor among the sleeping drivers. And he himself lay down alongside, pulling the lad close to his side and covering him with a flap of his field-jacket.

Early in the morning, the lad was wakened by his grandfather.

"Wake up," said the old man quietly. "Get dressed warmly — you can give me a hand. Get up."

Outside the window, the darkness of early morning could be seen. In the house, the men were still sleeping side by side.

"Here, put on these felt boots," said grandfather Momun. Grandfather smelled of fresh hay, which meant he'd already fed the horses. The lad pulled on the felt boots and went out into the yard together with grandfather. The snow lay in great drifts but the wind had died down. Only ground currents ran close along the snow from time to time.

"It's cold," the lad shivered.

"That's nothing," mumbled the old man. "It seems to be clearing up. What a business! The first of the year, and it whipped up like that. Never mind, as long as nothing terrible happened."

They went into the sheep-shed where five of Momun's sheep were being kept. The old man groped for the lantern on a post and lit it. The sheep peered at them from a corner and wheezed.

"Take this, you can hold the light for me," said the old man to the lad, handing him the lantern. "We'll slaughter the black ewe. The house is full of guests. We've got to get some meat ready before they get up."

The lad saw to the lighting for grandfather. The wind still whistled in the cracks; it was still cold and dusky outside. First the old man tossed an armful of fresh hay at the doorway. He led the black ewe there, but before felling her and binding her legs, turned thoughtful and squatted on his haunches.

"Set the lantern down," he said to the lad. "And you sit down too." Stretching his palms out before him, he began to whisper. "O great ancient mother of ours, Horned Deer-Mother. I am delivering this black sheep to you as a sacrifice.

For rescuing our children in an hour of danger. For your white milk, with which you nourished our ancestors; for your kindness and your motherly gaze. Do not abandon us on our passes, our stormy river and our slippery trails. Do not ever abandon us on our land; we are your children. Amen!"

He drew his palms down across his face beseechingly from his forehead to his chin. The lad did the same. Then grandfather felled the sheep and bound her legs. He unsheathed his old Asian knife.

And the lad held the lantern for him.

The weather turned calm at last. Once or twice the sun peered, as if frightened, from gaps in the racing clouds. Signs of the previous stormy night lay everywhere: random drifts, crumpled bushes, young trees with boughs bent by the weight of the snow and old trees which had fallen. The forest beyond the river was silent, tranquil and somehow dispirited. And the river itself seemed to be running lower; augmented by snow, the banks had become steeper. The water's noises were quieter.

The sun remained unsteady, alternately appearing and disappearing. But nothing darkened or disquieted the lad's heart. The worries of the previous night were dismissed, the blizzard forgotten and the snow no annoyance—it even made life more amusing. He rushed here and there, leaving only a spray of snow visible. He was happy because the house was full of people and the young drivers had slept well, and now talked loudly and laughed. And because they ate the lamb cooked for them with gusto.

Meanwhile, the sun was returning to normal. It shone more clearly and for longer intervals. The clouds dispersed somewhat and it even became warmer. The unseasonable snow began to sink rapidly, especially on the roads and trails.

True, the lad began to feel anxious when the drivers and loaders made preparations to leave. They went out into the yard

and said their goodbyes to their host, thanking him for their food and shelter. Grandfather Momun and Seidakhmat accompanied them on horses. Grandfather took along a stack of wood and Seidakhmat a large galvanised tank to heat water for the frozen motors.

They all started off from the yard.

"*Ata*, I want to go too," said the boy, running up to his grandfather. "Take me with you."

"You can see for yourself: I'm taking the firewood and Seidakhmat's taking the tank. Nobody has room for you. Anyway, why do you want to tramp out there? You'll tire yourself out walking in that snow."

Keenly hurt, the lad pouted. Then Kulubek took him along.

"Come on with us," he said, taking the lad's hand. "You can go back with your grandfather."

They set out towards the fork, to the point where the road descended from the *Archa's* hayfields. There was still a good deal of snow. It turned out to be not so easy to keep pace with the strong young men, and the lad began to feel tired.

"Come on there, get up on my shoulders," suggested Kulubek. He gripped the boy by the arm deftly, and nimbly lifted him up onto his shoulders. And carried him with such accustomed ease that one would have thought he did it every day.

"You do it fine, Kulubek," said the driver walking alongside.

"I carried my brothers and sisters all my life," boasted Kulubek. "Because I'm the eldest and there were six of us. Mother worked in the fields, and father too. Now my sisters already have children. I came home from the army unmarried and hadn't yet gone to work, and my sister—the eldest one—said, come on over and live with us, you're a smashing child nurse. No, no I said to her—that's enough. From now on, I'm going to carry my own children around."

They walked on in this way, talking of one thing and

another. Riding Kulubek's powerful shoulders, the lad felt happy and secure.

"If only I had a brother like this," he thought. "I wouldn't be afraid of anybody. Just let Orozkul try and shout at grandfather or lay a hand on anybody. One firm glance from Kulubek and he'd quiet down in a second."

It turned out that the lorries which had been left the previous night were about two kilometres above the fork. Snowbound, they looked like winter haystacks in a field. It seemed as if no one and nothing could budge them.

But they built a fire and heated some water. They started turning over one of the motors with a crank, and it came to life, coughed, and started. After this, the work went quickly. Each succeeding lorry was started by using a tow. Each running and warmed lorry then towed the one behind it in the column.

When all the lorries were working, they fixed up a double tow and lifted up the one which had run off the road at night. Everyone present helped drag it back onto the road. The lad too found a place for himself on the edge of things and lent a hand. He kept worrying that someone would say, "What are you doing here, getting under everybody's feet? Make tracks and get yourself out of here." But no one said these words and no one drove him off. Perhaps because it was Kulubek who'd allowed him to help. And he was the strongest of all; everyone respected him.

The drivers again said their goodbyes and the lorries started off. Slowly at first, but faster and faster. They stretched out like a caravan along the road among the snowy mountains. The sons of Horned Deer-Mother's sons drove off. They didn't know that on the strength of a child's imagination, Horned Deer-Mother ran, invisible, ahead of them on the road. With long, swift leaps, she bounded ahead of the column, protecting them against accidents and mishaps on the

difficult route. From snowslides and avalanches, from blizzards and fog; and from other adversities which had caused the Kirghizians so many tragedies in their centuries of nomadic life. After all, hadn't grandfather asked this of Horned Deer-Mother when he'd delivered a black sheep to her in sacrifice at dawn?

They drove off. And the lad went with them in his imagination. He sat in the cab alongside Kulubek. "Uncle Kulubek," he told him. "Horned Deer-Mother's running ahead of us on the road." "Really?" "It's true. Honest. There she is."

"Well now, what are you all lost in thought about? What's the point of standing around like that?" Grandfather Momun brought him to himself. "Come on, climb on here, it's time to go home." He leaned over on his horse and lifted the boy up into the saddle. "Are you cold?" asked the old man, and wrapped the skirt of his coat tighter around him.

When this took place, the lad hadn't yet started school.

But now, occasionally waking from his arduous sleep, his thoughts were troubled. "How will I go to school tomorrow? Because I'm really sick, I feel very bad . . ." Then he would drift off again. He dreamt that he was copying into his notebook words the teacher wrote on the blackboard. "*At. Ata. Taka.*"\* He filled an entire notebook with the first-form characters, page after page. "*At. Ata. Taka. At. Ata. Taka.*" He grew tired, his eyes fluttered and it became extremely hot. The lad removed his covers, and as he lay uncovered and growing cold, various visions again appeared before his eyes. At times he'd swim as a fish in the ice-cold river, swim out to the white steamship—but could not reach it, no matter what he did. Or he'd find himself in a fierce blizzard. In a cold, foggy storm, lorries loaded with hay skidded on a steep road leading

\* *At, ata, taka*: horse, father, horseshoe in Kirghizian.

up a mountain. The lorries sobbed like people and all skidded in place. Spinning madly, the wheels turned fire-red. The tyres burned, sending flames shooting up from the rubber. Bracing her horns against the body, Horned Deer-Mother thrust the lorry loaded with hay up the mountain. The lad helped her, straining with all his strength and drenched in hot sweat. And suddenly, the load of hay turned into a baby's cradle. "Let's run quickly now," Horned Deer-Mother told the lad. "We'll take the *beshik* to Aunt Bekai and Uncle Orozkul." They started running. The lad fell behind. But in the darkness ahead, the cradle's bell kept ringing and ringing, and the lad ran towards its call.

He awoke to the sounds of steps on the veranda and the squeaking of the door. Grandfather Momun and old grandma had returned, seemingly somewhat calmed. Apparently the driver's arrival at the cordon had forced Orozkul and Aunt Bekai to quiet down. But perhaps Orozkul had wearied of his drunkenness and fell asleep at last. Neither cries nor curses could be heard in the yard.

Near midnight, the moon rose over the mountains and hung like a misty disc over the highest icy peak. Fettered by eternal ice, the mountain towered in the murkiness, glistening like a spectre with rough facets. Around it lay the foothills, cliffs and black, motionless forests in total muteness; and at the very bottom, the river pulsed over the rocks with its sounds.

The moon's faltering light streamed through the window in oblique rays. The light bothered the lad. He tossed about and screwed up his eyes. He wanted to ask old grandma to put a curtain over the window—but didn't: old grandma was angry with grandfather.

"You're a fool," she whispered as she got into bed. "If you don't know how to behave yourself with people, you should at least keep your mouth shut. Better listen to others. You're in his hands. Your pay comes from him, piddling as it is. Still, it

comes every month. And who are you without pay? An old geezer, and you still can't think straight."

The old man did not answer. Old grandma fell silent. Suddenly, she shouted: "If a man's pay is taken away he's no man any more. He's nobody."

Again the old man made no answer.

The lad couldn't fall asleep. His head hurt and thoughts tumbled. He thought of school and felt anxious. He hadn't yet missed a single day, and couldn't imagine what would happen if he weren't able to go to his school tomorrow in Jelesai. And the lad thought too that if Orozkul kicked grandfather out of his job, old grandma would make the old man's life impossible. What then would become of them?

Why did people act this way? Why were some wicked and others kind? Why were there happy people and unhappy ones? Why were there some whom everybody feared and some whom nobody did? Why did some have children and others none? Why could some people keep back other people's pay? Probably the best people were those who got the most pay. For here was grandfather, who got little—and everybody insulted him. Oh, how to make it so that old grandfather also got more pay? Maybe then Orozkul would begin to respect him.

These thoughts made the lad's head ache even worse. Again he remembered the marals which he'd seen towards evening at the ford across the river. How were they getting on there at night? Because they were all alone on the cold, rocky mountains, in the pitch-black, impenetrable forest. It was terribly, terribly frightening there. What if they were suddenly attacked by wolves? Then who'd bring Aunt Bekai a magic cradle on her horns?

He fell into a troubled sleep and while drifting off, pleaded with Horned Deer-Mother to bring a birch *besnik* for Orozkul and Aunt Bekai. "Please let him have children, please bring

them children," he implored Horned Deer-Mother. Then he heard the distant tinkling of a little cradle-bell. Horned Deer-Mother was hurrying near, with a magic cradle hooked on her horns . . .