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# FINAL RESPECTS

Abdi-Jamil Nurpeisov



Liberty Publishing House  
New York





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NEW YORK

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*Translated from Russian by  
Catherine Fitzpatrick*

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*Final Respects*

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Tel: (212) 213-2126  
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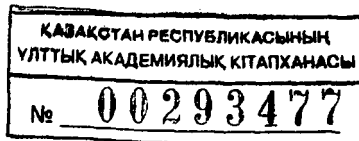
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Book cover and drawings by  
Alexander Blyakher

ISBN 978-1-932-686-96-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013937410

Printed in the United States of America



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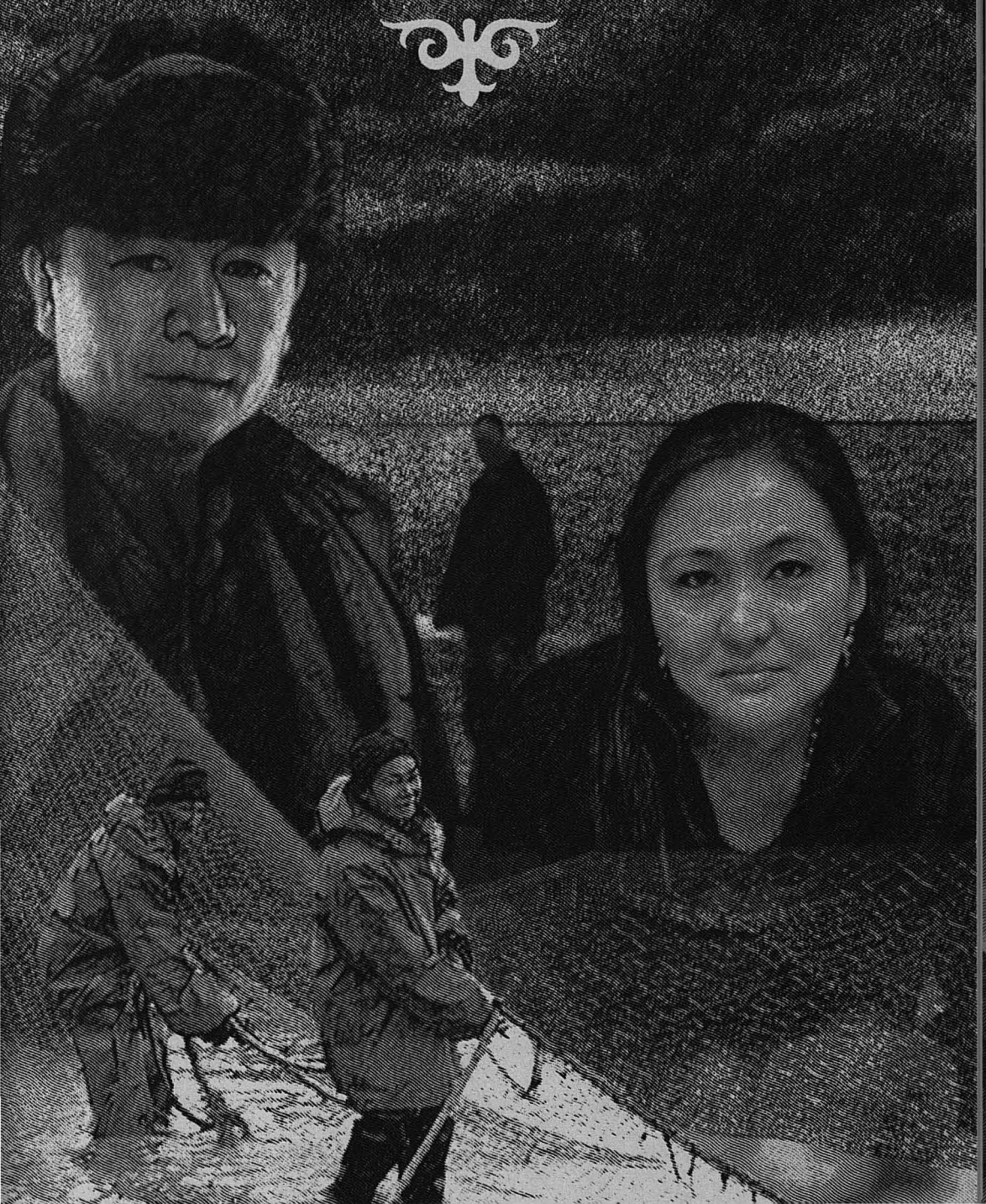


The author and Liberty Publishing House  
are pleased to acknowledge their gratitude to Islambek Salzhanov,  
founder of the International Charity Fund “Altyn Kyran”,  
for the initiative of this publication and for his support.





**Book One**  
**AND THERE WAS DAY...**



*I have committed no evil upon men.  
I have not killed.  
I have not diverted the running water...  
Book of the Dead.*

— Defense speech of the dead, postmortem before God  
(from an ancient Egyptian papyrus) —





## Part One



**Y**ou, a tall, dark-faced man stooped over, looking back at your tracks. You stared for a long time, entranced, not yet realizing what had suddenly attracted your attention. You had glanced back, to the dark outline of the fishing aul<sup>1</sup> in the winter shadows, and your gaze, slipping inadvertently past it, fixed on these footprints in the fluffy, new fallen snow. They were the uneven, heavy footprints of a tired man. You didn't know why, but their look provoked a profound sorrow. There was something awkward in them, out of sorts with their surroundings - what did they remind you of, why were they worrisome?

Wait a minute...was that not your very life? Was it not your own same awkwardness that had depressed Bakizat all those thirteen years? And now here it was at its ending - and you were lonely, forsaken, exhausted on a barren, icy field. For good reason it is said that a life at its end is like a torn rag. Perhaps, in a moment of desperation, someone had uttered these words, filled with interminable sorrow, and now you remembered them, and they became yours, too.

Maybe you had never pronounced them aloud, although in your soul you had long ago sensed their truth, but you knew that your married life was coming to this, and not to something else. But a man is so created; in a time of joy and prosperity, he avoids all gloomy forebodings. And at that time, you were dumbstruck by your overwhelming happiness.

After the wedding, as a specialist with a degree, you were over the moon, barely noticing the earth beneath your feet. The praise and flattery of your neighbors, the dreams come true, the hopes you had all turned your head and intoxicated you. Yet even so, in the depths of your soul, you knew that

<sup>1</sup> Central Asian village.

your merits and achievements in life were modest. Your father, the fisherman, had returned legless from the war and died long ago. You could only rely on your old mother, a pensioner, and your own callused hands. You had no strong kin or friends at all. True, there was your father's cousin, Sary Shaya...But it was better without that son of a bitch... And could you achieve much in this life if you set your hopes only on yourself alone?

It was not so great before your marriage. Oh, how you rejoiced on the day you received your diploma! You and your fellow graduates partied all night long in their joy - you sang, shouted, and romped, disturbing their neighbors' sleep. And in the morning, rinsing your pounding head under a cold stream from the faucet, you took to the road, hurrying to your native aul, happily humming a simple song: "Oh, Aral, my Aral, you blue expanse..." Your fiancée stayed behind for a short time in the city and you hoped to get a job in your field as quickly as possible before she arrived.

Bakizat and her girlfriends saw you off. It was noisy and crowded at the train station. Right before the train took off, the girls suddenly got mischievous and began chanting "Kiss!" to the bride and groom. Shy, you glanced at Bakizat in embarrassment. And in reply, with a barely perceptible annoyance, she winked at you as if to say, *don't pay attention to them, girlfriends get all kinds of things into their heads*. But the pranksters wouldn't let up, and giggling, kept pushing the two of you together. Bakizat seemed dejected somehow. A weak smile flashed across her dull face. In order to get rid of her annoying girlfriends, she brought the tips of her fingers to her ruby lips and made a loud air kiss.

The train began to move quietly. With several jumps, you reached the last car and jumped up onto the footboard. While the passenger car slowly dragged around the turn, you hung from the train, looking intently at the platform where your bride remained surrounded by her girlfriends. She was waving her hand, and with sudden mischief, assumed a whining grimace. She jerked her chin downward and wiped away an imaginary tear with her finger. The girls were dying from laughter.

Meanwhile, the train picked up speed. The other stations passed in a whirlwind. The passing tracks, the little adobe homes with gardens...somebody's life... unknown destinies...The Guryev trailer rumbled back and forth, seeming to jump from the rails at top speed. It was long past midnight, dawn was approaching, and sleep would not come. The other passengers were snoring.

All night, you could not close your eyes. You thought about Bakizat. How unlike from that luminous, light woman you had known for years, had she been on that day that she saw you off. Was that because her relationship with Azim was ruined? Not long before there had been persistent rumors that she was just about to marry him, and no one, not even you, doubted that for a minute. And yet suddenly... How could it be? You didn't get it. And all the guys from Aralsk studying in the capital were also amazed, and kept asking each other in perplexity about what had happened between them? No one could explain anything.

Soon, only a few days after their falling-out, you amazed all your fellow villagers with the news of your marriage to Bakizat. This seemed incomprehensible to them; it just wouldn't fit in their heads. And you yourself couldn't believe your own avalanche of happiness, so unexpected. Really, could you have hoped for such a thing, when Azim himself stood between you and Bakizat?

Regardless, you felt as if your feet barely touched the ground. You went crazy... And really, you couldn't imagine such a thing either in your dreams or real life, and you didn't really understand how it all happened. You were like a bird in those days, flying somewhere high above clouds. Down below, on the dark and stuffy pavement of the city, eternally preoccupied people rushed around living their mundane lives, but you hovered serenely between the sky and earth, sticking out your head to all the cloudy winds. And it was only on dates with Bakizat that the rosy fog of your delights instantly dispersed and languished, and once again you returned to gray, everyday life.

In the fumes of the prolonged winter smog, the city seemed gloomy, like a man who has not slept enough. The pavement and the homes were all dirty gray. The streets were gray. The people were ugly and gray. Spraying gray mud, they raced about in gray cars speeding busily. And as if she didn't want to stand out in that monotonous world, your bride always dressed in something grayish, and her face was as sad and gray as well. And she stood before you, depressed and doomed, digging in the ground with the toe of her high-heel... You of course, guessed the reason for all this but still stood before her, just as doomed but unable to say a word, and looked at the tips of your worn boots.

Then suddenly you were rocking on the upper berth of the train car and remembering Bakizat and her girlfriends...

"Hey, fellow! We're approaching Aralsk..."

You jumped up and quickly collected your things. And barely jumping from the train, which immediately jerked and began to move, you immediately felt how hot it was in your dear homeland, where now, until deep in autumn, the sun would ruthlessly bake down from the broiling, Aral sky. A searing, burning dry wind blew incessantly from the steppe. The summer heat was especially unbearable at noon, when it seemed as if even the shadows hunch over, as if trying to hide under the walls of the low houses, and flee under the decrepit, dusty trees on the narrow and winding little streets of the small town, which smelled sharply of the salt marsh, and baked adobe.

For a whole week, you went door to door in various offices looking for work. Despite your naïve hopes, no matter where you went, no one, not a single bureaucrat, received you with joyous embraces. No sooner did you darken the doorway of an office than its owner, like a goat, would cast a morose, hostile look at you. No sooner did you utter something about a job, than he would grow indifferent, and no longer listen to you, burying himself in his papers. You didn't know whether to keep standing there, wiping the sweat from your brow, or walk backwards and get out the door as fast as possible. The fruitless rounds grew unbearable and humiliating and soon the tips of your canvas shoes had worn through completely.

And that one day... you didn't know whether to laugh or cry! That day, Bakizat was supposed to come on the night train. As usual, you had been running around since morning looking for a job, and wound up in some run-down building located on the outskirts of the little town. This was your last chance. Somehow overcoming your shyness, you opened the door of the tiny office, where a fat man with a meaty face and a hanging double chin sat at a desk. You were seized with fear. Barely crossing the threshold, you were going to stop, but no... despite your expectations, this fat man didn't glare at you, like the others, with a hostile cautious stare, although at first he stared attentively at the unexpected visitor with his little button eyes, but they immediately warmed, to your joy. Since then, thirteen years had passed, but to this day you don't know whether he rejoiced, that someone had come at that very moment, when he was dying from the heat and didn't know where to put his excessively large body, which barely fit into this stuffy little office infused by the southern sun. Or perhaps, who knows, he found it funny that the person he had taken for a grown man turned out to be an awkward, shy youth.



Whatever the case, in the auger-shaped pupils of his pig-like eyes, suddenly a cheerful spark danced.

“Come in, come in,” he said, surprised that the shy youth, frozen at the threshold, and crushing his faded, old cap with both hands, did not dare to come closer. “Don’t be shy! Come in!”

The kind-hearted fat man, fanning himself with the newspaper, looked at your diploma and seemed to mumble indistinctly with clear approval, “Yes! Yes! Him... hmmm!” and then suddenly raised his head and asked:

“So, your name is Jadiger?”

“Yes, yes, Jadiger,” you repeated and thought joyfully, *Maybe, I’ll get lucky!* Your heart beat harder.

“You know... it seems that there was a *batyr*<sup>2</sup> from the epic tale who was named Jadiger. But you... you...” and either surprised or gladdened by the comparison he had come up with, the fat man looked you over from head to toe and chuckled. “Look here, you look a bit like a *batyr*. The height is right, and you’re long-legged. And that... sprout of yours... I bet that’s pretty long, too, eh? Ha-ha-ha!”

The cheerful fat man leaned back in his chair groaning under his weight, threw back his head and laughed hoarsely with a rich cackle. Your small life experience told you that there were such kind-hearted uncles who would feel the need to at first to tease you a bit before doing you a favor, as if they were playing cat and mouse, and enjoying their power.

“Listen...it seems you’re the son of the respected fisherman Amirjan?”

“Yes, *aga*<sup>3</sup>.”

“So you’re the son of that Amirjan that lived on this coast, and not the other side. Right?”

“We’re from this coast...”

“*Apyray, a?*<sup>4</sup> If you’re the son of the respected Amirjan who lives on this coast and not the other side, then it would seem that you lanky devil are from the Jakaim clan?”

“Yes, *aga*. We’re from the Jakaim clan...”

“Well, that’s good, that’s good... Only tell me know, are you the upper Jakaims or the lower?”

<sup>2</sup> Dashing equestrian, man of courage or athlete.

<sup>3</sup> “Uncle”, a term of respect attached to the name as a suffix.

<sup>4</sup> Expression of wonder or surprise.

You mumble something without understanding what this mysterious “upper” and “lower” meant.

“Well, tell me, which Jakaims are you from – the sea or the dry land?”

“Probably the sea...”

“Oh, Allah, it turns out we are in the same clan. And it seems...I remember when you were just a snot-nosed little boy... oh, ha-ha-ha!”

You were not offended; on the contrary, you were pleased that this cheerful fat man was your kinsman. And not just a kinsman, but a relative – from the clan of the sea-faring Jakaims.

“So it turns out...”

You had no doubt that now you would hear from the mouth of this kind-hearted cheerful man, who was one of your fellow clansmen, the long-awaited words about a job offer. Oh, then... by Bakizat’s arrival, your ordeals would be over. Everything would be worked out, you would only have to celebrate your wedding! No, it was for good reason evidently that today, since morning, your right eye had a tic – they said that was to the good, for good luck. *Maybe, he will take me on to work here?* – the shy little thought flashed by. And in the hope of hearing about all this now from your fellow clansman, you timidly stared at him. Understanding your look, the fellow sea-faring Jakaim rocked heavily on his creaking chair and chuckled again.

“Listen, if you are from the sea-faring Jakaims, then you must know the ditty about our clan... About the sea-faring Jakaims. It’s a funny one:

*Oh, Jakaim, Jakaim!  
Is his glory great:  
He swallowed salty water –  
Now his joints all ache...*

“So, what do you think?”

“What are you saying, *aga*... Those aul wisecrackers thought that up, they’re just making fun of one another...”

“A joke, you think? No, it is a harsh life’s truth. If you want to know, my dear, a man who constantly drinks salt water will get salt in his bones. And that’s why his joints hurt. Genes, you understand! Well, then, walk back and forth. If you’re a real sea Jakaim, then as Allah is my witness, you should have shooting pains in your heels when you walk!”

And here the cheerful fat man with his whole hog jowls once again leaned back in the chair and broke into an unrestrained guffaw. He laughed

so hard that the folds of his belly, pushed over the edge of the table, quivered in repeated shocks. His pig-like eyes disappeared, hidden completely, and turned into two little slits. Only his wet mouth kept gasping for air like a fish... You grabbed your papers from the desk and hurried out of the office. You didn't look back again as you hurried to the station to meet Bakizat.

Thirteen years had passed since then. You never met the fat Jakaim again. Actually, no... Once, many years later, you unexpectedly saw him in the capital, chairing a conference. He didn't notice you, and you didn't go up to him. But your ears still burned, even now, from the jokes the fat kinsman had made.

Everything comes back again, as if it is about to happen in reality. And Bakizat's mother, your mother-in-law who has ceased to like you, still harangues you even now, not concealing her enmity: "Remember, *zyatyk*,<sup>5</sup> we're the ones who helped you get on in the world somehow."

Yes, the influential clansmen of your wife had many connections in the city and in the auls. And you had to give them credit, at first they swept you up like a rapid current grabs a boat. But unfortunately, you could not walk on a leash. How many times, when Lamb Gut (as they nick-named him), the first secretary of the District Party Committee, pledged his support, and they wanted to transfer you to a good position in the city, had you, devoid of ambition at the critical moment, always turned them down, suddenly growing obstinate, like a camel at a ford? Who knows what would have become of you without their cares and troubles, even if you had graduated from a dozen universities? Most likely you would have become the first fisherman with a diploma since the day of the creation of the blue Aral in that territory, and would be stamping through the salty water in your boots and dragging nets. In fact, your mother-in-law, even today, giggling maliciously, has never stopped calling you "our fisherman with a diploma."

Well, let her laugh...Now she can amuse herself to her heart's content!

\* \* \*

You, now a tall, dark-faced man, cannot tear your gaze away from your footprints. And the harder you stared at these tracks, the more you do not recognize your former self in them. Yes, you was different then, and had had different tracks. You used to walk dragging your foot a bit, leaving uncertain, dragging tracks, but today, something had clearly shaken you.

<sup>5</sup> Son-in-law.

Look! Over there, where you stepped boldly, crazily, as if some unchecked furious anger drove you, burning your soul since morning. You must have not looked the best at that moment. No doubt your thick brows, covered with frost, furrowed. Your large eyes grew white with anger. And, my friend, you were terrible. You clenched your heavy fists, as if made of cast-iron, as if you had just burst out of the flame.

It was a good thing that Bakizat didn't see you in those moments... And if she had, most likely her dark eyes would have burned and she would have said, "Oh, that's your beastly temper!" Glory to the Almighty who knows what you might have done in your burst of fury. And as bad luck would have it, the last straw was your relative Sary Shaya. Always capable of driving anyone mad, he burst into your office with a wail.

"*Oy-bay*!"<sup>6</sup> Where...where is your male pride? Alright, maybe you don't value your male pride, but where is your clan pride? For the sake of the clan's pride, didn't your ancestors go to their deaths? If you won't go, then I will. Either I will die, or I will kill! But I will shed blood!" Sary Shaya was now totally shaking from anger. "I see you do not value your male pride. *Foo*, you lump!" and he broke off, unable to calm himself. Recalling his insane fury, you burn from shame even now, here, amid the barren sea, open to all the winds.

Bakizat was right. Beastly temper! Wasn't that true? Wasn't your unbearable nature to blame for everything? Weren't all your problems from that? Wasn't it because of it that you could not find peace either at home or in the steppe, and were now languishing idly on a snowed-in barren ice patch?

With a practiced eye, you noted that the cold snaps of the recent days had turned the coastal water hard, and the icy smooth surface of the shore ice stretched almost to the very horizon. Running from the aul in the morning, dazed, you wandered along the taut young ice and almost reaching its dangerous, bending edges, beyond which the open sea was steaming, and then you stopped. The brief winter day was rapidly disappearing. But you, the lonely man, kept standing at the same place where you had stopped in the morning. And your thoughts were stamping in place. Already, the icy cold had imperceptibly crept through the soles of your boots. The cold of loneliness reached your very heart, but you continued to stand. Go back? No you didn't plan to do that. But you couldn't go forward either, and

<sup>6</sup> Expression of sorrow.

forward, in about three places, exuding white steam, fumed the heavy, winter water.

The sea was not calm today.

It was howling and writhing, and from the boundless distance, there was an endless hollow roar. A bluish sleet fell. The rest of the world was embraced in some kind of cautious quiet. Today at dawn, snowflakes fell and whitened and brightened everything around with fresh snow – except the dark, ugly steppe beyond Bel-Aran. All around there was nowhere for the eye to fall; only the listless footprints dragging behind you, which lay powerless under your feet.

Why are you laughing? At your own footprints? Or yourself? No matter what, yet another burning hurt, hurling heat into your face, instantly burned your heart. And cats scratched in your soul... Those listless tracks which constantly irritated Bakizat, why is it, one wonders, that they prick both you and your pride today? And you stand and don't know on whom to unleash your fury.

Yes, old friend, no matter what the case, something happened to you. And how your countrymen had changed... Remember, in the old days after prolonged bad weather, when winter would suddenly descend with a heavy frost and the cover under the bluff was frozen overnight with a thin coating of ice? Remember, remember now, on such a day, how the men of the coastal auls would sit around, with their hands folded? Oh, what fisherman by birth wouldn't be seized with joy at the first sign of the coastal ice? Who wouldn't want to be first to go out on the springy young ice, to cheerfully take a risk and test its firmness? To place the first net under the young ice – a job always joyful and sacred for the fishermen, like the farmer throwing the first handful of seeds on the freshly-plowed earth in the spring, with a prayer on his lips!

On such a day, you would get up earlier than everyone. First, you would head to the horse shed. You would open the gates wide, stuck with frost. The heavy, stagnant smell of green *kurak*<sup>7</sup> would strike you from the threshold. The bay with a little star on his forehead would be drowsing lightly in the stall in the far corner of the shed. Sensing his master, he would neigh softly. With a practiced motion, you would throw on the bridle and then fasten the sweat-stained saddle on his back.

The horse would have not yet shaken off his sleepy languor, making him pliant and obedient. When a grown man suddenly lowered his whole

<sup>7</sup> Coastal reeds.

weight into the saddle and barely touched the spurs, the horse would then sink down, shifting his legs, and then immediately strengthen and acquire stability. And in his still twilight eyes under the clinking blinder, a suppressed purple fire would flash. Nervously glancing from side to side, the horse would try to turn to his familiar meadow beyond the aul, but with an authoritative movement of your hand, you always directed him toward the coast. The vexed horse would roll his head and with nervous fury carefully hoof his way over the clanking, frozen earth. And then you, getting angry at him, would pull the reins harder and squeeze your legs so tightly that you were certain that the horse's ribs would crack any minute. Feeling the authoritative force of the rider, the horse would turn in the right direction and in a minute would obediently carry you with a light, wide trot.

Meanwhile, morning would break. The frost squeaked and crunched, and a cold wind would blow in your face from the comfortably fast trot. And it was as if your soul acquired wings. Below, under the hooves, the snow flurries flew by and immediately crumbled into white dust. And throughout the entire breadth of the steppe, fantastically hunched over, wave after wave of snowdrifts receded into the distance. The horse under you trotted easily, with a clattering of hooves and a frozen shriek plowing through the mounds of snow. And in the deep parts, he made his way almost with his chest, not interrupting even so his even trot and growing more heated. He broke forward, overcoming crossing after crossing, until he reached the hillside, beyond which the entire bread of the boundless sea opened, twinkling and blinding you with patches of sunlight.

Oh, what days those were! Nearly falling off the cliff, reining in the horse, and standing up in the stirrups, you would stretch out, gazing from an eagle's height on the full brilliance and light of that remoteness, as if you were above the entire Aral coast, and each time, from irrepressible amazement your heart was filled and stood still. Is it really possible to restrain the fisherman from a happy smile when he looks at the boundless stretches of the sea? It's as if you don't have anything beneath you, and your heart is tearing out of your chest is, and your soul is entirely there in that eternally enticing, eternally remote expanse!

Deceptive, illusory, transitory world! No, it has not taken everything away - and before, such happy days as these fell to your lot! Long ago you realized that your ancestors, simple shepherds, knew quite a few wise truths. They were the ones to lament, "it is useless to search for the tracks of past days." And really, where were they now, those shadows of the past, capable



for at least a moment of quieting your soul, when in a moment of turmoil, you suddenly end up in a dead end? And if fortune stubbornly turns away from you, like a wayward wife from the marital bed she has tired of, then consider that the days, months, and years of your life really do look like a scampering fox, confusing even you with intricate tracks. Here you stand, downcast, not finding comfort or joy in a single of the innumerable tracks you have left across your Aral Sea region.

Oh, God! Good Lord, does a man hounded by his misfortune tire in body, in spirit and in memory? But no! Oh, no, you still remember how it all was. You remember how you flew up the hillside at a rapid trot and pulled on the reins at the very edge of the bluff. Further, carefully descending down the bluff with your horse, you hobbled him in the rushes along the shore, twisted by yesterday's wind, and went out on the ice. You walked and walked...now fast, now slowly and carefully, stopping often, if the ice seemed dubious to you. Your footprints revealed only your decisiveness, only your cautiousness, and you were never a slave to fear before fate. Sometimes you tested the ice for firmness, and beat it hesitantly with the hob-nailed heel of your boot. Thus you went further and further away from the shore, determining finally that reliable limit to which you could go out with the nets without danger.

Looking the ice over once again and reinforcing the reed landmarks along the edge of the ice (which looked like amusingly like little bundled up children from a distance), you turned back, satisfied that you had done the important deed that was repeated every year at this time. That's how it always was. That's how it had been in the past. And today?

Now, as this dark-skinned lanky fellow, you raised your head, thoughtfully looking around as if trying to understand why today was different from the many others of your life and why suddenly today you were standing all alone on the deserted ice patch. Then once again, you looked at the line of footprints, which broke off at your very feet in doom.

This time you suddenly flinched. What were these articulate footprints telling you? Was it about the horse, which suddenly lost strength, exhausted under the rider, and sinking, stretching with its last strength under your heavy fishermen's boots? Was it that here your unfortunate life would end and break off?

"No! No!" and standing with quivering lips, you now held yourself back with difficulty. In fact, there was no one to blame. If someone was to blame for the fact that the black cloud of misfortune had hung over you, then it

was you alone. Bakizat? No, she was not to blame. On the contrary, as if she could sense trouble, before leaving for Alma-Ata, she had begged you to go together. She had offered, "Let's at least spend this holiday together, as husband and wife. Let's have a rest. Let's meet with our classmates." She knew that if she went to the capital alone, then she would inevitably see Azim. You knew it as well. You would often be beside yourself, jealous of her every move without reason, so God knows what got into you.

"Go by yourself," you said. "Have a rest. If I leave, the fishing will be disrupted. You know how the bosses needle me." Oh, unfortunate one! Aren't you the one, if you consider it, who pushed her into the arms of Azim? And nevertheless, you are the one who accused her, poor thing... Not only accused her, but beat her bloody. Nearly killed her! A pampered woman who had lived with you for thirteen years under one roof, who had never argued with anyone about anything, and who would not have gotten over your shameful escapade, if it weren't for the children. Yes, the children...for their sake...Only because of them, her heart in her mouth, swallowing her pride, had she unwillingly agreed to remain with you. But she hardly forgave you.

What man in his right mind, after all of that, could reproach Bakizat? On the contrary, they would more likely be contrite and cooperative. They would agree to anything, and fulfill and of her caprices. But you...*Apyray...apyray*, without having washed away your previous guilt, your previous shame...really, now, eh? You could understand her. She, like any woman, wanted there to be a master in the house who wasn't always traveling far away. Someone who would allow your children to grow up warmed by their father's affection.

And therefore, she was always against your going out with the fishermen. Worse, you would be gone for weeks, and sometimes months, somewhere on the sea. You think back on that one time, particularly bad, when she resisted your plan to visit the fishermen at the mouth of the Syr Darya River, saying stubbornly, "You're not going! I won't let you!" And that time, too, you were betrayed by your unfortunate beastly temper. If only you had listened to her...then, who knows whether it would have all turned out as it had now? But you got stubborn and repeated only, "I must go."

That woman, who had grown used only to her will being fulfilled, was cut to the quick and didn't want to listen to anything. "You unfortunate," she said. "You should see yourself! You have only one thing on your mind - fish. You've forgotten your wife, and you've forgotten your children. That's

enough racing around the sea. I will never let you go. I won't let you go! You won't go!" You smiled pathetically, and wanted to say that you absolutely had to go, no matter what, but then as bad luck would have it, the old *kolkhoz*<sup>8</sup> truck came up to the house, and honked, reminding you that it was time to go. The driver, who had just tossed back a hundred grams,<sup>9</sup> honked again immediately.

"Coming!" you cried in irritation. You were infuriated by that old driver with his eternally burning *papiroska*<sup>10</sup> hanging from his lip, his sweaty, pimpled face and his dirty, crushed cap pulled down over his eyes. His truck was just as dilapidated as the old son of a bitch himself; it roared like a half-slaughtered camel.

"Batish,<sup>11</sup> my dear... Try to understand, put yourself in my place..."

"You're not going!"

"Batish... You... But you're so smart... Try to understand..."

"I don't understand. And I don't want to understand. For the sake of some stinking fish, for the sake of your fishermen, you're ready to leave your wife and children."

"What are you saying, honey? What's gotten into you? Listen to me..."

"I don't want to listen. I don't need your explanations."

"You know..."

"I don't want to know!"

"But Batish... If I don't go this time, how can I look them in the eyes?"

"That's not my problem."

"But think... Think of it yourself... Those poor things spend the whole summer there. Is it easy for them? They have wives and children too. Just imagine, the heat, the mosquitoes, the black flies, and the fish aren't biting worth a damn. Judge for yourself, who would find out about them if it weren't for me? Who else cares about them?"

Bakizat remained silent. It seemed that your desperate words reached her heart. You were overjoyed. You were happy that you had convinced her, you smiled and moved toward your wife, who was standing, turned away, angrily pouting, and you tried to embrace her. But she sharply pushed away your arms.

<sup>8</sup> State collective farm.

<sup>9</sup> A measurement of a glass of vodka.

<sup>10</sup> Soviet filter-less cigarette with cardboard holder.

<sup>11</sup> Nickname for Bakizat.

“You’re not going!”

“Batish, my dear... You’ll see...in a wink...I’ll be there and back. Trust me... Trust me. I swear to you, I will find out how they are doing, I’ll spend the night there, and tomorrow I will be home.

Bakizat, without a word, quickly and resolutely headed toward the door. You were about to throw yourself after her, but you didn’t manage and the door slammed with a bang right in front of your nose. Shaken, you froze in place with your hand reaching after your wife.

\* \* \*

The driver, glancing sideways at the chairman, immediately figuring out that the *baskarma*<sup>12</sup> was seriously depressed by something, and therefore wasn’t uttering a word. An inveterate joker and prankster, he behaved familiarly with the amiable chairman, sometimes like a buddy, like a pal that with whom he had just shared, as he put it, “a hundred.” But now the chairman was clearly out of sorts. The driver put his heavy hands with the nickel ring on the little finger on the wheel of the truck, which was sputtering for some reason, and patiently awaited his orders.

“Let’s go!”

“*Ma-ment!* In a minute...”

The driver spit on his palms. He leaned toward the loosened windshield, and felt around for something under his feet. Only then did he press on the starter. As usual the motor wheezed, coughed and rumbled, and then immediately broke off into a death rattle. “Oh, your mother!” the driver swore, and angrily stepped on the gas a few times, after which the car shook and rattled as if in a fever. Something grated and strained, and then reluctantly the truck set off.

Every day it was the same old thing. It was a kind of ritual of its own, occurring in more or less strict succession, and people in the aul had long grown used to it. Everyone knew that the truck would budge from its spot until the driver flew into a rage, and broke out in cunning profanity, and knocked the piece of iron under his feet, and threw open the dented hood, and tinkered around there with a stalk or a match, and spit on something, hissing venomously. Sooner or later it would start up and then lumber along over the bumps and potholes of their native lands. So let it misbehave, let it snort and shake, because essentially, it was unfailing. What else could it

<sup>12</sup> Chairman.