

# Mother Earth

by

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Father, I know not where you lie buried. I dedicate this to you, Torekul Aitmatov. Mother, you brought us up, the four of us, I dedicate this to you, Nagima Aitmatova.

In her white, freshly-laundered dress, dark quilted jacket and white kerchief she slowly walks along the path through the stubble. There is not a soul anywhere. Summer is over. No voices can be heard in the field, no lorries raise a trail of dust on the dirt roads, no harvesters can be seen on the horizon, and the herds have not yet been put out to graze in the stubble.

Beyond the grey high road the autumn steppe fades away into the distance. Rows of smoky clouds move soundlessly above it. The wind sweeps soundlessly over the field, rippling the feather-grass and dry weeds and slips off soundlessly towards the river. There is a smell of wet grass drenched by morning hoarfrost. The earth is relaxing after the harvest. Bad weather will soon set in, the rains will come, the first snow will cover the earth and blizzards will rage. But now it is quiet and peaceful.

Let's not disturb her. She has stopped and gazes about with the dull eyes of old age.

"Hello, Field," she calls softly.

"Hello, Tolgonai. So you've come? You've got much older. Your hair is white. And you carry a staff."

"Yes, I'm getting old. Another year has passed, and you, Field, have had another harvest. Today is the day of commemoration."

"I know. I've waited for you, Tolgonai. But have you come alone again?"

"Yes, as you see, I'm alone again."

"Then you haven't told him yet, Tolgonai?"

"No, I didn't dare."

"Do you think no one will ever tell him? Do you think no one will ever mention it by accident?"

"I know. Sooner or later he'll find out. He's bigger now, he might find it out from others. But to me he's still a child. And I'm afraid, so afraid to say anything."

"A person must learn the truth, Tolgonai."

"I know. But how can I tell him? That which I know, that which you know, my beloved field, that which everyone also knows, he alone does not know. And when he finds out, what will he think, how will he look upon all that has happened? Will his mind and his heart lead him to the truth? He is still a boy. That is why I am uncertain about what I am to do, how, I am to keep him from turning his back on life. I want him always to look upon it boldly. Ah, if only it were possible to tell it to him simply, in just a few words,

like a fairytale. I can think of nothing else these days, for who knows, I might die suddenly. Last winter when I fell ill and lay in bed I thought my end had come. It was not death I was afraid of - had it come I would not have resisted - but that I would not have time to open his eyes. I feared I would carry his truth away with me to the grave. He could not understand why I was so anxious. He worried about me, he even stayed home from school and kept close to my bed, he's the image of his mother, 'Grannie, Grannie! Should I give you your medicine? Or some water? Do you want another blanket?' But I could not summon up the courage, I did not have the heart to say anything. He's so trusting, so innocent. Time flies so quickly, and I cannot think of a way to start the conversation. I pondered it this way and that, but I always came to the same conclusion. If he is to judge all that has happened correctly, if he is to understand life properly, I must tell him not only about himself, not only about his own life, but about many other people and their lives as well, about myself and my times and about you, my field, about our life, and even about the bicycle he rides to school, never suspecting a thing. Perhaps that is the only right way. For nothing can be discarded, nothing can be added: life has mixed us all together in a single batter, it has tied us all into a single knot. And such is the story that not every adult can see his way clear through it. It has to be experienced to be understood by the heart and the soul. And so I keep thinking. I know it is my duty, and if I could fulfil it, I would not be afraid to die."

"Sit down, Tolgonai. Don't stand there, your legs are tired. Sit down on that stone and let's think it over together. Tolgonai, do you recall the first time you came here?"

"It's hard to remember, so much has happened since then."

"Try to anyway. Try to remember it all from the very beginning."

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I recall very dimly that when I was little they would lead me here by the hand during harvesting and sit me in the shade under a haystack. They would leave me a chunk of bread so that I wouldn't cry. And then, when I got bigger I would come running here to guard the crops. In the spring they would drive the herds through here to the mountains. I was a fleet-footed young girl with flying hair then. What a wonderful, carefree time childhood is! I remember the herdsmen were coming through Yellow Valley. Herd after herd, heading to new pastures, to the cool mountains. When I think of it now I realise how foolish I was. The herds thundered across the steppe like an avalanche, if you got in their way they'd trample you in a second. The pillars of dust rose a mile high in the sky, but I would hide in the wheat field and jump out at them suddenly like an animal and frighten them. The horses would rear up in terror, and the drovers would chase after me.

"Hey, you shaggy-head! Just wait till we get our hands on you!"

But I would dodge them and scamper away down the irrigation ditches.

Rust coloured flocks of sheep passed here day after day, their fatty tails swaying in the dusty air, their hoofs clattering like hailstones. Black-faced shepherds drove the flocks onward. Then came the nomad camps of the rich villages with their camel caravans and their wineskins of fermented mare's milk tied to the saddles. The young girls and young wives, dressed in silks, swayed on their frisky pacers as they sang songs of green meadows and clear waters. I wondered at them and, forgetting all else, would run a long way after them. "Oh, if only I had such a dress and a tasseled shawl!" I dreamt, gazing after them till they disappeared from view. What was I then? The barefoot daughter of a hired farm-hand. My grandfather had been made a ploughman for the rest of his life to pay off his debts, and so it went in the family. Yet though I never had a silk dress, I grew into an attractive girl. I liked to watch my shadow. I would walk along looking at it, as if admiring myself in a mirror. I certainly was a funny girl. I must have been seventeen when I met Suvankul during harvesting. That year he came down from Verkhny Talas to hire himself out as a farm-hand. Even now, if I close my eyes, I can see him exactly as he was then. He was still very young, about nineteen. He didn't own a shirt but went about with an old quilted jacket thrown over his bare shoulders. He was so black from the sun he looked smoked; his cheekbones glistened like burnished copper, and though he seemed thin and lanky his chest was strong and his arms were made of steel. You won't often find a worker such as he. We reaped the wheat easily and close to the ground, all you would hear was the ringing of the sickle and the swish of cut ears. There are people like that: it's a pleasure to watch them work. Suvankul was such a one. Though they said I was a fast reaper, I could never keep up with him. Suvankul would work his way far ahead, then he would glance back and return to help me. But that hurt my pride, and I would become angry and chase him off, saying:

"Who asked you to come back? Leave me alone, I can manage without you!"

He would not take offence. He'd just chuckle and carry on in silence. Why did I get so cross then, silly girl that I was?

We were always the first at work. Dawn would just be breaking, everyone else would still be sound asleep when we set out for the field. Suvankul always waited for me at the edge of the village, on our path.

"Here you are," he would say.

"I thought you left long ago," I would always reply; though I knew he would never leave without me.

And then we would go on together.

Meanwhile, the dawn would break, bathing the highest snow-capped mountains in gold, while the wind from the steppe blew in like a river of the purest blue. These summer dawns were the dawn of our love. When we walked alone together, the whole world seemed different, as in a fairy-tale. And the field, the grey, trampled, ploughed-up field became the most beautiful field in the world. An early skylark met the

breaking dawn with us. It would fly up high, ever so high, and hang suspended in the sky like a dot, trembling and fluttering there like a human heart, its song ringing with such abandoned joy.

"Look, it's our skylark singing!" Suvankul would say. How strange, we even had our own skylark.

And that moonlit night? Perhaps there will never be another like it. That night Suvankul and I remained to reap by moonlight. When the moon, so huge and pure, rose over the crest of that dark mountain, all the stars in the skies opened their eyes. I thought they could see us. We were lying on Suvankul's jacket at the edge of the field. The crest of the irrigation ditch was our pillow. It was the softest of all pillows. And that was our first night. From that day on we were always together. Suvankul gently caressed my face, my brow and hair with his heavy, calloused hand, communicating through his palm the joyous pounding of his heart.

"Suvan, we'll be happy, won't we?" I whispered.

And he replied:

"If the land and the water are divided equally among all men, if we, too, have our own field and if we plough and sow and thresh our own grain, that will be our happiness. A person needs no greater happiness, Tolgonai. The tiller's happiness lies in what he sows and reaps."

I liked what he said very much, it made me feel so secure. I embraced Suvankul tightly and kissed his hot, weather-beaten face over and over again. Then we bathed in the ditch, splashing and laughing. The water was cool and fresh, it sparkled and smelled of mountain winds. And then we lay on the ground, holding hands, looking at the sky and the stars in silence. There were so many stars that night.

The earth rejoiced with us that soft blue night. The earth, too, delighted in the coolness and silence. There was a hush over the steppe. Water gurgled in the ditch. The heady smell of sweet clover made us dizzy. It was in full bloom. Now and then a burst of hot, sage-laden wind would rush by, making the ears of grain on the boundary sway and rustle. Perhaps there was only one such night ever. At midnight, in the dead of night, I looked up at the sky and saw the Way of the Reaper, the Milky Way, stretch straight across the heavens, a wide silvery path among the stars. I recalled Suvankul's words and thought that perhaps a kind and mighty tiller had really crossed the sky this night with a great armful of straw, leaving in his wake a trail of fallen chaff and grain. And suddenly I imagined that if our wishes ever came true my Suvankul would also carry a great armful of straw of the first threshing across the threshing-floor. It would be the first armful of straw from our own grain. And as he would carry this fragrant straw, he would leave a trail of chaff behind. That is what I dreamed, and the stars shared my dream. Suddenly I wished desperately that all this would come true. Then, for the first time, I spoke to Mother-Earth as I would to a human being. I said: "Earth, you suffer us all on your breast; if you do not give us happiness, then why are you Earth and why are we born? We are your children, Earth. Bring us happiness, make us happy!" This is what I said that night.

Next morning I awoke and saw that Suvankul was not by my side. I do not know when he rose, it must have been very early. New sheaves of wheat were piled up everywhere in the stubble. I felt hurt, for I would have loved to work by his side in the early hours.

"Suvankul, why didn't you waken me?" I shouted. At the sound of my voice he glanced back. I remember him as he was that morning: stripped to the waist, his strong, dark shoulders glistening with sweat. He stood there and his expression was one of joy and puzzlement; as if he did not recognise me. Then, wiping his face, he said with a smile:

"I wanted you to sleep a little longer."

"But what about you?" I asked.

"I'm working for two now," he replied.

At this I felt wounded, I nearly wept, though my heart rejoiced.

"But where are your promises of yesterday?" I reproached him. "You said we would be equal in everything, as one person."

Suvankul threw down his sickle, ran over, caught me up and said through his kisses:

"From now on we shall be as one in everything, my dearest, sweetest skylark!"

He carried me about in his arms, talking to me, calling me his skylark and other funny names, while I twined my arms about his neck, giggled and kicked and laughed, for only little children are called skylarks, and yet how wonderful it was to hear those words!

The sun was just coming up, the corner of its eye was rising over the mountain. Suvankul set me down, put his arm round my shoulders and suddenly shouted to the sun:

"Hey, Sun! Look, here's my wife! See what a wife I have! Pay me for looking at the bride with your rays, pay me with your light!"

I don't know whether he said this in jest or in earnest, but suddenly I began to cry. I just couldn't hold back the joy that filled my heart to overflowing.

I think of it now and cry, silly me. For those were very different tears, they are given to a person only once in a life time. And did our life turn out as we dreamed? Yes, it did. Suvankul and I fashioned our life with our own hands, we worked hard, never putting down our hoe, come summer or winter. Truly, we watered the field with our sweat. Then in new times we built a house and had a few head of cattle. In a word, we began to live a decent life. But the greatest joy was the birth of our sons, three of them, one

after the other, and all fine boys. Sometimes a terrible feeling of remorse sears my soul and foolish thoughts plague me: why did I have them every year or year-and-a-half like a ewe, couldn't I have had them every three or four years like other people? Then perhaps all this would not have happened. Perhaps it would have been better still if they had never been born. My children, I am saying this from grief, from pain. For I am a mother, a mother...

I remember the day they first came to the field. It was the day Suvankul drove the first tractor here. He had been going to Zarechye, across the river, all autumn and winter, learning to drive a tractor. None of us really knew what a tractor was in those days. And when Suvankul was away till nightfall, for it was a long way to walk, I felt both sorry for him and hurt.

"What in the world did you get mixed up in all this for? Weren't you happy being a team-leader?" I reproached him.

But he smiled gently always and said:

"Now, Tolgonai, don't fuss. Wait till spring, then you will see. Just wait a bit longer."

I wasn't bitter when I said this, it was just that the children, the household and my work on the collective farm were too much without his help. But I would calm down quickly when I saw him chilled and hungry, and me making him feel guilty besides. In the end, I would feel awkward.

"All right, come sit near the fire, your food's ice cold," I would grumble, as if forgiving him.

In my heart of hearts I understood that Suvankul was not playing games there. There was not a single literate person in the village then to attend the lessons, so Suvankul volunteered. "I'll go," he said, "and I'll learn to read and write too, if you relieve me of duties as team-leader."

Well, he volunteered, but he had his share of trouble. It was an interesting time, a time when children taught their fathers. Kasym and Maselbek were already at school then, and it was they who were the teachers. In the evenings we would have regular lessons at home. There were no tables then. Suvankul would lie on the floor as he copied out the letters in a notebook, and the three boys crowded round from three sides, each one lecturing him: "Father, hold your pencil straighter." "See, the line is crooked." "Watch your hand, it's shaking." "This is how you have to write." "Hold your notebook like this." Or else they'd fall to arguing among themselves and each one tried to prove that he knew best. If it were anything else, their father would have put them in their places; but here he listened to them respectfully, as if they really were teachers. He'd be exhausted by the time he'd written a word, the sweat would be running down his face as if he were loading grain at the threshing machine, not writing letters. They'd be mumbling all together over his notebook or primer. Looking at them all I felt like laughing.



"Children, leave your father alone. Are you trying to make a mullah of him? And you, Suvankul, don't try to do everything, choose one thing: either be a mullah or a tractor driver."

This made Suvankul angry. He would look away, shake his head and sigh:

"This is no joking matter."

It really was both sad and funny. But be that as it may, Suvankul had his own way in the end.

One day early in spring, when the snow had just melted and the warm weather had set in, there was a rattle and rumble outside the village. A terrified herd thundered down the street. I ran out of the yard. A tractor was moving along beyond the gardens. It was black and made of iron and was belching smoke. Soon the entire village had surrounded it. Some were on horseback, others on foot, they were shouting and jostling each other as if at the market. I ran there with my neighbours. The first thing I saw was my sons. All three were standing on the tractor beside their father, holding on to each other tightly. The boys around were whistling and tossing up their caps, and my sons were so proud, just like heroes, their faces were radiant. What rascals they were, running off to the river first thing in the morning to greet their father's tractor without a word to me about it for fear I'd forbid them to go! And I was terribly worried about them, for who knew what might happen.

"Kasym! Maselbek! Djainak! Wait till I catch you! Get down immediately!" I shouted. But I couldn't even hear myself in the din and roar of the motor.

Suvankul understood me, though; he smiled and nodded as if to say, don't worry, nothing will go wrong. He sat at the wheel so proud and happy and looked years younger. Indeed, he was still a young *djigit* with a black moustache in those days. And then, as never before, I realised how greatly my sons resembled their father.

The four of them looked like brothers, Kasym and Maselbek, the older ones, were exactly like Suvankul, just as lean, with the same firm brown cheek-bones that shone like burnished copper. The baby, Djainak, was more like me, he was fairer and his eyes were black and gentle.

The tractor rolled on beyond the last houses without stopping, and we trooped along after it, curious to see how it would plough. When the three huge ploughshares cut easily into the virgin soil, turning over slabs of earth as heavy as a stallion's mane, everyone clapped and shouted and rushed down the furrow, pushing ahead of each other, whipping their prancing, snorting horses. I don't know why I moved to one side by myself, why I lagged behind, but suddenly I found myself all alone. There I stood, unable to move. The tractor receded farther and farther away, but I just stood there helplessly, following it with, my eyes. Yet there was not another person in the whole world as happy as I that day! I did not know what to rejoice at more: the fact that Suvankul had brought the first tractor to the village, or the fact that I had suddenly realised that day how our children had grown and how closely they resembled their

father. I followed them with my eyes, crying and whispering: "May you always be beside your father as now, my sons! If you grow up to be like him, I shall never ask for anything more!"

Those were the best years of my motherhood. I was a good worker, I always liked to work. If a person is healthy, if his arms and legs are strong, what can be better than work?

Time passed, and before I knew it the boys had grown as straight and tall as young poplars. Each now chose his own way in life. Kasym followed in his father's footsteps: he became a tractor-driver. Then he learned to be a combine operator. One summer he was a driver on the Kaindy Collective Farm near the mountains on the other side of the river. The next year he returned to his own village as a combine operator.

A mother loves all her children, she carries all of them in her heart, and yet, I think I loved Maselbek more than the others. I was very proud of him. Perhaps it was because I missed him so while he was away. Like a fledgling that has learned to fly the first, he was the first to leave home at an early age. He was good at school from the very start, he loved to read, and would give up anything for a book. He left for the city to study after finishing school, for he had decided to become a teacher.

My youngest, Djainak, grew into a strong, handsome lad. The only trouble was that he was hardly ever at home. They elected him secretary of the farm's Komsomol organisation, and he was forever busy with meetings, study groups, the wall newspaper and such like. It would make me angry to see the way he spent his days and nights forever on the go.

"Listen, you good-for-nothing," I would say, "why don't you pack up your accordion and your pillow and go and live in the farm office? You don't care where you live. And you don't need a home, or a mother and father. "

But Suvankul would take his son's side. He would wait till I stopped scolding and then would slip in:

"Don't be upset, Mother. Let him learn to live with others. If he were hanging about wasting his time I'd be the first to tan his hide."

By then Suvankul had returned to his old job as a team-leader. Youngsters were driving the tractors now.

The next big event was Kasym's marriage. The first daughter-in-law crossed our threshold. I did not ask them how it had all come about. They had probably taken a liking to each other when Kasym was working as a driver across the river that summer. He brought her from Kaindy.

Aliman was a young, dark-skinned mountain girl. At first I was simply happy that my daughter-in-law was so pleasant, pretty and quick. Soon I came to love her, for she was a girl after my own heart. I had always secretly dreamed of a daughter of my own. But this wasn't the only reason. It was mainly that

she was sensible, hard-working and as pure and clear as a piece of glass. I came to love her as my own. Many women cannot get along together, but I was lucky, a daughter-in-law such as she in the home was a true joy. Happiness, real, genuine happiness as I understand it, is not something that happens by chance, pouring down on you like a summer shower. It comes to a person little by little, depending upon his attitude towards life and his fellows, it grows by tiny bits, one bit adding on to another. Then we have what we call happiness.

It was a memorable summer the year Aliman came to us. The wheat ripened early. And the river flooded early, too. There had been heavy showers in the mountains a few days before harvesting. Even from afar one could see the snow melting like sugar up above there. The waters came thundering down the flood-lanes, churning and bubbling, flecked with yellow foam, carrying along great uprooted firs from the mountains, smashing them to bits at the falls. The first night was the most terrifying of all, the river groaned and moaned under the slope till dawn. In the morning we saw that the old islands had disappeared, they had been washed away completely during the night.

But the days were hot. The wheat was ripening evenly, greenish near the roots and golden towards the tips. There was no end to the ripening fields, the wheat swayed in the steppe as far as the horizon. Harvesting had not yet begun, we were only reaping the wheat at the edge of the fields by hand, making way for the combine-harvester. Aliman and I worked side by side, causing some of the women to chaff me:

"You'd be much better off at home without a care in the world instead of competing with your daughter-in-law. You have no self-respect."

I disagreed with them. What sort of self-respect was it to sit at home? I, for one, would never be able to do that, I love harvesting too much.

And so Aliman and I worked side by side. It was then that I witnessed something I shall never forget. Wild hollyhocks were blooming among the ears at the field's edge. The large pink-and-white blossoms fell under the sickles together with the ears of wheat. I noticed that Aliman had gathered a bunch and was carrying it off on the sly. I watched her wondering what she would do next. She ran over to the combine, placed the flowers on the bottom step and then ran back. The combine stood at the roadside, for the harvesting was to begin any day. There was no one there, Kasym had apparently gone off somewhere.

I made believe I had not noticed a thing, I did not want to embarrass her, for she was still shy, but in my heart I was very happy: this meant she loved him. Thank you, dear daughter-in-law, for being so good, I said to myself. I can still see her as she was then, in her red kerchief and white dress, carrying a big bunch of hollyhocks, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining with joy and mischief. Ah, youth! Oh, Aliman, my dearest daughter! She loved flowers like a little girl. In springtime, when the snow was still piled high in snow-banks, she would bring the first snowdrops from the steppe. Oh, Aliman!

Harvesting began the next day. The first day of reaping is always a holiday, never have I seen a gloomy person on this day. No one has ever proclaimed this day a holiday, but it lives in the people themselves, in their gait, their voices, their eyes. There is a holiday spirit in the clatter of the traps and the brisk canter of the well-fed, glossy horses. No one actually does a full day's work the first day of reaping. Here and there banter and merry-making take over. That morning, as always, was noisy and crowded. Merry voices rang out from one end of the field to the other. But it was the merriest where we were, the hand-reapers, because there was a whole swarm of young women and girls. They're a mischievous lot. Kasym was just riding by on the bicycle the farm had awarded him. The mischief-makers blocked his way.

"Come on, driver, get off your bike. Why didn't you greet the reapers? Have you become so stuck up? Come on now, bow low to us, bow to your wife!"

They crowded round him and finally made him bow low to Aliman, asking her forgiveness. He tried his best, saying:

"Forgive me, kind reapers, it is all my fault. From now on I'll bow to you a mile away."

But he was not to be let off so easily.

"Now," they said, "ride us on your bike, just like city girls, so the wind whistles in our ears!"

And they rushed to help each other onto the seat with the others running along, laughing their heads off. They might have sat still on the seat. . . but no, they wriggled and shrieked.

Kasym was exhausted from laughing so much.

"That's enough, let me go, you she-devils!" he pleaded.

But they would not. As soon as one girl got off, another would jump on.

Finally, Kasym became really angry.

"Have you all gone mad? The dew has dried, I have to get the combine going, and look at you! Did you come here to work or play games? Let go!"

Oh, that was a day full of laughter. The sky was as blue as blue can be, and the sun shone so brightly!

We got down to work, the sickles flashed back and forth, the sun grew even hotter, and the air was filled with the sound of cicadas chirping. Until you get into the swing of it, a job is always difficult, for want of practice, but the good cheer of the morning never left me that day. My heart was light and free. Everything my eyes saw, everything I heard and felt, everything, I thought, was created for me, for my happiness, and everything, I thought, was brimming over with such beauty and joy. It was a joy to watch

someone galloping along, disappearing in the high waves of wheat - perhaps it was Suvankul? It was a joy to hear the ringing of the sickles, the swish of the falling wheat, the voices and laughter of the reapers. It was a joy to see Kasym's combine passing near by, blotting out all other sounds. Kasym stood at the wheel, putting his cupped hands under the dark stream of threshed grain falling into the bunker, each time bringing a handful of grain up to his face, breathing in its aroma. I felt that I, too, was breathing in the warm, milky, heady smell of ripe grain. And when the combine stopped for a moment across from where we were, Kasym shouted as if from the top of a mountain:

"Hey, driver, hurry! Don't keep me waiting!" Aliman grabbed up a pitcher of *airan*,<sup>1</sup> saying:

"I'll run over and give him a drink!"

She made a dash for the combine, running over the fresh stubble, so young and lithe in her red kerchief and white dress, and it seemed as if she was carrying the song of a loving wife instead of a pitcher. Everything about her spoke of love. Suddenly I thought, 'I Wish Suvankul had some *airan* to drink,' and looked about, but in vain. Once harvesting has begun, you'll never find the team-leader, he spends his days in the saddle, galloping back and forth, burdened by cares and responsibility.

That evening at the field camp we ate the first bread of the new harvest. The flour had been milled beforehand from the ears we had reaped by hand around the edges of the field a week before. Many times in my life have I eaten the first bread of the new harvest, and each time, as I bring the first piece to my mouth, I feel as if I were performing a sacred rite. Though the bread is dark and tacky, as if baked from thin batter, its sweetish taste and aroma cannot be compared with anything in the world: it smells of sun, fresh straw and smoke.

The sun was already setting when the hungry reapers returned to the field camp and gathered on the grass beside the ditch. The wheat at the far edge of the field seemed aflame. The evening promised to be light and lingering. We squatted on the grass near the tent. True, Suvankul had not come yet, he was due any minute, and Djainak, as always, had disappeared. He had ridden off to the club-room on his brother's bicycle to post up some notice or other.

Aliman spread a cloth on the grass, dumped a pile of fresh apples on it, brought out the hot wheat-cakes and filled the cups with *kvass*. Kasym washed his hands in the ditch and, taking a seat by the cloth, slowly broke the cakes into pieces.

"They're still hot," he said. "Here, Mother, you taste the new bread first."

I blessed the bread, and when I took a bite I sensed a strange taste and smell. It was the smell of the combine operator's hands, of fresh grain, hot iron and kerosene. I took other bites and all of them had a faint trace of kerosene, but never before had I tasted such delicious bread. This was my son's bread, my

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<sup>1</sup> *Airan* – a cooling drink. – Ed.

son had held it in his driver's hands. It was the people's bread, it belonged to those who had raised it, to those who were at the field camp with my son that evening. It was sacred bread! My heart brimmed over with pride for my son, but no one knew of this. I thought then that a mother's happiness comes from the people's happiness, like a stem from the roots. There is no life for a mother away from the life of her people. I will never renounce this faith of mine, even now, no matter what I may have suffered, no matter how harshly life may have treated me. My people go on living and so I, too, go on living.

That evening Suvankul did not come till late. It grew dark. The young people had bonfires going on the cliff over the river and were singing songs. I recognised my son Djainak's voice among the many voices. He played the accordion and always led all the merry-making. As I listened to the familiar voice of my son I spoke to him in my mind. "Sing, my son, sing while you're young, a song purifies the heart, it brings people closer together. Then, when you hear this song some day, you will recall those who sang it with you this summer evening." And once again my thoughts turned to my children, for such is a mother's nature. I thought, "Kasym is now independent, thank goodness. In the spring he and Aliman will set up house for themselves, they've already begun building their house and buying their own furnishings. And before you know it there'll be grandchildren." I was not worried about Kasym, he was a hard worker like his father, never resting for a moment. Though it was already dark he was still on the combine, for there was just a little left to finish. The tractor and the combine had their headlights on. Aliman was there beside him. Every moment together was precious during the harvesting.

Then I thought of Maselbek and my heart felt heavy. He had sent us a letter the previous week. He wrote that he would not be able to come home for the holidays this summer. He was being sent somewhere to Lake Issyk-Kul with a group of children, to a Young Pioneer camp where he would be a leader. Well, there was nothing to be done about it, and since he had chosen this kind of work it meant he enjoyed it. No matter where he was, the main thing was that he was healthy, I reasoned.

Suvankul came back very late. He ate quickly and we returned home. The household duties had to wait till morning. I had asked our neighbour Aisha to look after the cattle in the evening. Poor woman, she was often ill. She would work a day on the farm and then stay home for two. Her sickness was a woman's sickness, her back always ached, and that is why she only had her one son, Bektash.

It was night when we rode home. A breeze was blowing. Moonlight swayed on the ears of wheat. The feathery tips of ripe thistles brushed against the stirrups, softly raising waves of heady pollen. I could tell by the smell that sweet clover was in bloom. There was something so familiar about this night. My heart skipped a beat. I sat on the saddle pillow behind Suvankul. He always offered to ride me in front, but I liked to ride behind, holding on to his belt. He was very tired and silent as he rode along, having spent himself during the day. From time to time his head would drop forward, making him start suddenly and spur the horse on, and all this was very dear to my heart. I looked at his rounded shoulders and leaning my head against him I thought lovingly: "We are getting older, Suvan. Well, time keeps marching on. But I don't think we're living our lives in vain. That's the main thing. It seems like yesterday that we were young. How fast the years fly by. Yet, it's still so wonderful to be alive. It's too soon for us to give in. There is still so much to be done. I want to live on with you for many, many years."

I raised my head, looked up at the sky and gasped: there, high among the brilliant stars, stretching across the heaven as before, was the broad silvery streak, the Way of the Reaper. And once again I was ready to believe that someone had really crossed there with a great armful of fresh straw, dropping bits on the way. There, up above, the golden bits of straw, the beards and chaff swayed as if touched by the wind. One could even make out the grain that had been spilled together with the chaff. "My goodness!" I whispered in awe, and in a flash I recalled everything: that first night so long ago, our love, our youth, and the mighty tiller I had dreamed about. The land and the water were now our own, we ploughed and sowed and threshed our own grain. Yes, everything we had thought about that first night had come true. We had no way of knowing on that first night that new times would dawn, that a new way of life would come, but the innermost hopes of the people had coincided with the hopes of the times, the desire for goodness and justice. I sat quite still caught up by these thoughts, saying nothing. Suvankul turned to me and said:

"Have you fallen asleep, Tolgonai? You're tired. Never mind, we'll be home soon. I'm all in, too." He was silent for a while and said: "Would you care to turn in at the new street?"

"Yes, let's."

The new street was going up on the wasteland at the edge of the village. Actually, there was no street there yet. That spring they had just marked off the plots for the newlyweds. There were walls here and there. Kasym and Aliman had also received a plot. That is why we wanted to drop by on the way and see how things were going. There's not much time during harvesting to go of on personal errands in the day-time. Kasym, Aliman and Djainak had made clay bricks in the spring, and now they were drying in stacks. They had dug the trench for the foundation and had carted stones and gravel from the river the previous week. Luckily, they had managed to do all this before the river overflowed. Now the rocks formed a large pile in the middle of the yard. Suvankul was pleased with his children's diligence.

"Well, they've made a beginning here. There's enough stone, even more than enough," he said. "After harvesting we'll put up the walls and do the roof. We can finish all the odds and ends next spring. We won't have time to do everything before winter sets in anyway. Don't you agree, Tolgonai?"

"Yes," I said. "The main thing is to get the walls up and finish the roof. The rest will take care of itself." Suddenly, I thought of Djainak and smiled. "Now take our Djainak, he'll never let things be. He said they passed a resolution at their meeting and decided to name the street Komsomol Street. Aliman teased him and said: 'Djainak, you're like that old dreamer Nasreddin. The child hasn't been born, yet you have a name for it. Why don't you get married first, build yourself a house, layout the street in front of it and then think up a name?' But Djainak wouldn't give in. 'You don't understand a thing,' he said."

Suvankul shook his head and smiled.

"You're right. He was born to be impatient. But he's thought of the right name for the street. All the houses belong to young new masters. We're growing, there are more and more people each year. There's not enough space in the village now, so we have to layout new streets. That's a good sign. And when there are houses along the new street, you'll see that your son was right."

As we stood there talking we could not know that this night was the most accursed of all nights.

3

"Lift up your head, Tolgonai. Pull yourself together."

"All right. What else can I do? I'll try. Dear Earth, do you remember that day?"

"Of course I do. I never forget anything, Tolgonai. I bear the traces of the centuries since the beginning of time. Not all history can be found in books, not all history has remained in the minds of people, but it is all within me. And your life, too, Tolgonai, is within me; in my heart. I hear you, Tolgonai. Today is your day."

4

Next morning we started working before the sun was up. That day we began reaping a new strip of wheat on the cliff over the river. A combine has no room to turn on a strip like that but the ears were already dry, they always ripen faster along the edges of a field. We had just fanned out in single file and had reaped no more than two sheaves each when we suddenly noticed a rider on the other side. He had shot out from behind the last houses of Zarechye and was raising a trail of dust, galloping headlong through the bushes and reeds as if someone were chasing him. Soon he reached the rocks along the bank. But he urged his horse straight on over the rocks to the river. We straightened up in amazement: what pressing need was whipping him on, why didn't he turn towards the bridge that was only two miles downriver? The rider was a Russian boy. He was forcing his chestnut stallion into the river. We gasped: did he want to kill himself? One could not play games with the river at a time like this. Why, during flood-time a camel, let alone a horse, would be carried off by the current and neither hide nor hair would ever be found of it.

"Hey! Where are you going? Stop! Stop!" we shouted. He was shouting, too, and waving his arms, but the roaring river drowned his words, we could only make out a drawn-out " ... a-a-a-a-... "

We could not understand him. And then he yanked the horse's bit, whipped his chestnut stallion, and plunged into the river. The current caught them up immediately. The horse's head, its ears laid flat and its teeth bared, flashed here and there among the waves. The boy was hanging on to its mane. His cap was torn from his head and whisked down into a whirlpool. We ran to and fro on the bank. The current was carrying him off quickly, but he had caught its movement and was heading towards the bank at an angle. He was carried far downstream and came up on the shore below the mill. We all sighed with relief. Some were impressed with the rider's courage and praised him. Someone said there must have been a reason for his coming and we ought to find out what it was, but another said with disgust:



"It's just some drunken fool showing off, and here you are ready to chase after him!"

That took care of that. We had work to do. "That's right," I thought, "a sober person would never take such a risk."

When Kasym's combine suddenly went dead and stopped - that day he was mowing a strip near the mill - I paid no attention, thinking the driving belt had come loose or a chain had broken, or any other of a number of things might have gone wrong. Aliman was reaping not far from me. Suddenly she screamed in a high-pitched voice:

"Mother!"

I started. She stood there as pale as a ghost, her sickle at her feet.

"What's the matter? Is it a snake?" I ran towards her.

She said nothing. I followed the direction of her frightened gaze and stopped dead. There was shouting near the combine, people were running towards it straight across the wheat, there were men on horseback, others, standing upright in the wagons were whipping their horses on.

"Something's happened, Mother!" Aliman shouted and broke into a run.

A reaper's words pierced my heart:

"Someone must have got caught in the blades! Or fallen into the drum! Hurry!"

And everyone ran after Aliman.

"God forbid! God forbid!" I prayed, raising my hands as I ran. I fell flat jumping over the ditch, scrambled to my feet and ran on. Oh, how I ran across the wheat then! I wanted to shout, to tell the others to wait for me, but I couldn't, my voice failed me.

When I finally reached the combine, a crowd was milling about. I could not hear a word, could not make out anything. I rushed into the crowd, shouting: "Wait! Let me through!" The people parted. When I saw Kasym and Aliman standing side by side near the combine I stretched my shaking arms towards my son like a blind woman. Kasym took a step towards me and caught me up.

"It's war, Mother!" I heard his voice coming from far, far away.

I looked at him incredulously. "War? Did you say war?" I asked.

"Yes, Mother. It's war."

But still I could not understand, could not grasp the meaning of it.

"What do you mean, war? Why war? Did you say war?"

I kept repeating the strange, the horrifying word and then suddenly became terrified and wept softly from the fright I had just experienced and from the startling news.

Tears streamed down my cheeks; taking their queue from me, the other women began to wail and moan.

"Quiet! Be quiet, everyone!" a man's voice shouted.

Everyone became still, waiting to hear the man say that it was not true. But he said nothing. And no one else said anything. It became so quiet in the steppe we could hear the river rumbling. Someone sighed loudly and moved. Everyone became tense again, yet no one said a word. Once again it became so still in the steppe we could actually hear the heat, like the high whine of a mosquito. Kasym looked about and muttered in a low voice, as if speaking to himself:

"We'll have to hurry if we're to take in the harvest before the snow." He was silent for a moment, then glanced swiftly at the driver and said: "What are you standing there for? Start the motor! What are you all looking at? If we don't take in the wheat, you'll be the ones to suffer! Come on, let's get back to work!"

The crowd began to disperse. I noticed the Russian boy from Zarechye. He was standing there, soaked to the skin, holding the reins of his wet horse. The movement of the crowd seemed to jolt the young messenger, he raised his fair head slowly and began to tighten the saddle strap. I realised then what a very young boy he was, no older than my Djainak, just a bit taller and more broad-shouldered. Wet strands of hair were plastered to his forehead, there were bruises on his lips and face. He gazed out at the world with such stern suffering that I sensed he had just left his boyhood behind. He had become a man, today, now, in a single morning. He sighed deeply, put his foot in the stirrup and addressed one of the village boys:

"Listen, mate, go and find the farm chairman and the team-leaders and tell them they're wanted at the district committee, I've no time, I still have to go to two other collective farms." With these words he mounted his horse and jerked the reins.

But the lad he had spoken to stopped him.

"Wait. You've lost your cap. Here, take mine. It's hot today."

We gazed after the young herald, listening to the uneasy rumbling of the dusty road under the hoofs of the chestnut stallion that was racing off like the wind. Soon a cloud of dust enveloped the rider. Yet, we still stood by the roadside, each lost in his own thoughts. When the motors of the combine and the tractor suddenly roared in unison the people started and looked at each other.

From that moment on, a new life began, a life of wartime. If we could not hear the thunder of battle we heard our own hearts and the cries of our people. Never before in my life had I known such burning, scorching heat. You could spit on a stone and your saliva would boil. The wheat ripened all at once in three or four days: there it stood, dry and yellow in a solid wall, stretching to the far horizon, waiting to be reaped, what a wealth of wheat! It was terrible to see so much going to waste in the lush. How much was trampled, lost and scattered along the roads. We were so pressed for time we could not even bind the sheaves, but simply forked the wheat into the wagons and then carted it off quickly to the threshing-floor, with countless ears spilling all along the way. But that was not the worst of it.

Each day men were called up and left. Those who remained behind kept on working. In the noonday heat and all through the stifling nights, reaping and threshing and transporting the grain, working on and on without sleep, without rest. And there was more and more work to be done, for there were less and less men to do it. Kasym, my poor son, did he really think he alone could do what was beyond the strength of many? The harvesting was dragging out hopelessly, and he kept driving his combine up and down the fields like a madman. It rumbled on night and day, reaping strip after strip of wheat, racing from one field to another in clouds of scorching dust. Kasym did not leave it once in all those days. He stood on the platform, whipped by the burning wind, peering like a hawk into the murky haze which concealed other wheat-fields waiting to be harvested. It was both terrifying and pitiful to look at him, at his blackened face, at his hollow, bristly cheeks. My heart bled for him. "He'll come to his end, he'll collapse in the sun," I thought, but I could not bring myself to say so. I could tell by the angry glitter in his eyes that he would not back down, that he'd stay at his post till the end.

And that last hour finally dawned. Aliman came running towards the combine one day and returned crestfallen.

"He's been called up." "When? "

"They just sent a messenger from the village Soviet." I knew that sooner or later Kasym's turn would come. And yet, when I heard the news my knees gave way. Such a sharp pain shot through my work-weary arms that I dropped my sickle and sunk to the ground.

"What's he doing there, he'd better start getting ready," I mumbled, finding it hard to control my trembling lips.

"He said he'd come home in the evening. I'll go now, Mother. You tell Father. I haven't seen Djainak all day. Where can he be?"

"Go on, Aliman. And prepare some batter. I'll be along soon," I said.

But I remained sitting on the stubble as before. I sat there for a long time. I did not even have the strength to pick up the kerchief that had fallen from my head. My eyes came to rest on a long file of ants scurrying along the path, they were hard at work, dragging bits of straw and grain, never suspecting that a human being, suffering deeply, was sitting there beside them, that I, too, was a worker, a toiler like themselves, and that at that moment I envied them, those tiny creatures. They could keep at their work without care or worry. Would I have envied an ant's life if it had not been for the war? I'm ashamed to even think of it.

Meanwhile, Djainak drove up in his cart. He was a member of a Komsomol team delivering grain to the railway station. He had probably heard his brother had been called up and had come for me. Djainak jumped down, picked up my kerchief and put it on my head.

"Let's go home, Mother," he said, helping me to my feet.

We rode away in silence. Djainak had changed beyond all recognition during the past few days, he had become very serious. There was something about him now that reminded me of the Russian boy, the messenger. The same sombre spirit had come to dwell in his young eyes. He had also said goodbye to his youth during these few days. Many others had done the same. As I thought about Djainak I recalled that we had not had word from Maselbek in a long time. "What could have happened? Had they called him up, too? Why hadn't he written, why couldn't he at least send a short note? He had probably forgotten what it was like to be at home. He had forgotten his father and mother and become swallowed up by the city. This was no time for studying. He would be better at home, what was there to do in the city now?" These were my sad thoughts as I sat in the cart.

"Djainak, you go to the station often," I said, "have you heard what they're saying? Will the war be over soon?"

"No, Mother, it won't. These are hard times for us. The Germans keep forcing us farther and farther back. If we could only get a hold someplace and give them a good beating we'd begin to roll forward, I think it'll happen soon." He urged on the horses, turned round and said: "Are you afraid, Mother? Are you very much afraid? Try not to think about it. Don't think about it, Mother, and don't worry. Everything will be all right, just wait and see."

My silly little boy, that was his way of comforting me.

Could anyone stop thinking? If I closed my eyes and stopped up my ears I would still go on thinking.

When we came home we found Aliman sitting and weeping. She had not even mixed the dough. I was very angry. "What's the matter, are you any worse off than the rest?" I wanted to say. "Everyone's leaving, not only your husband. Look at you, sitting there snivelling. That's no way. How are we going to

carry on?" But I changed my mind and didn't say anything. I took pity on her youth. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps I should have scorched her soul from the very first days, so that later it would have been easier. I don't know. All I know now is that I said nothing.

Kasym came home towards evening. As soon as he appeared in the gateway, Aliman turned from the fire she was tending and rushed towards him in tears, flinging her arms round his neck.

"I won't stay behind, I won't stay without you, I'd rather die!"

Kasym had come straight from the combine, dusty, dirty and grimy. He lifted his wife's hands from his shoulders and said:

"Wait, Aliman. I'm filthy. Give me some soap and a towel and I'll go and wash in the river."

Aliman turned to look at me. I understood. Handing her an empty pail, I said:

"And bring some water while you're at it."

The moon had made three-quarters of its journey by the time they came back from the river that night. I was managing at home by myself, with Djainak to help me. By midnight Suvankul appeared. I had been waiting for him, wondering where he could be. He said he had ridden off to the mountains during the day to bring the grey pacer back from the herd. We had bought it as a foal for Kasym when he had first started out as a tractor driver. It was a fast horse with sound, thundering hoofs and white socks on its hind legs. The whole village knew him and girls even sang:

*When I hear the pacer on the road  
I run out to watch him pass ...*

Suvankul wanted his son to ride his grey pacer at least a day or two before he left.

Early in the morning we all started out for the enlistment office. Aliman and I rode in Djainak's cart, while Kasym and his father rode their horses. That was a time when everyone was on the move. There were still a lot of men in the villages. I looked at the high road: it was like a black ribbon with one end in the Great Gorge and the other disappearing out of sight. People from all the villages had come here on horseback and in ox-drawn carts. There were so many people and carts in the district centre, you couldn't make your way through. There were small children and old men and women. All of them clustered around their boys, never leaving them for a moment. Some were weeping, others were slightly tipsy. How true the old saying is: people are like a sea, with deep and shallow places. It was the same here, in this noisy send-off to war. There were bold, clear-eyed young men who conducted themselves very well, who spoke well and even cheered their people up; singing and dancing to an accordion. There were Russian and Kirghiz songs, and everyone sang *Katyusha*. That is when I first heard it.

The large enlistment office yard could not hold all the mobilised soldiers and so they were lined up in the middle of the main street when the roll was called. The people calmed down immediately, everyone held his breath. I looked at those who were going off to war and a great wave of fire burned my throat. They were all alike: strong and healthy young men. They all had long lives ahead of them, to live and to work. Each time they called someone's name he answered "Here!" and looked towards us. I started when they called "Suvankulov Kasym!" and a new wave of intense pain seared my heart. "Here!" Kasym replied. Aliman squeezed my hand hard. "Mother," she whispered. What could I do? I understood that this parting was very difficult and terrifying for her, but who could stand aside from one's people, especially in such days of trial. Oh, Aliman, my Aliman, she, too, understood that this was a wartime demand, it was the country's need. Never have I known a woman who loved her husband as she did.

We returned to the village that day, having been told that the men would leave in twenty-four hours. Kasym had talked us into returning home. He said there was no sense us wearing ourselves out in town and that he'd stop by on the way to say good-bye, since, luckily, our collective farm lay near the high road. We left Suvankul's horse for Aliman and rode back in a wagon with the others. Djainak was also remaining behind to take the recruits to the station in his cart.

That night when I entered the empty house I gave vent to my feelings and wept bitterly. Suvankul boiled some water for tea, poured me an extra-strong cup and made me drink it. Then he sat down beside me and said:

"Who were we, Tolgonai? Together with this people we have become something. So let us share everything equally with our people, both the good times and the bad. When times were good, everyone was content, but now would you have everyone think only of himself and bewail his fate? No, that would not be honest. Control yourself tomorrow. If Aliman is so upset, that's another thing, for she has not seen what we have of life. And you are a mother. Remember that. And then again, if the war drags on, I'll have to go, too, and Maselbek's nearly of age, he might be called up. If need be, we'll all go. So, Tolgonai, be prepared for anything, try to get used to the thought."

The column set out the next afternoon. Kasym and Aliman overtook the others and came galloping up. Kasym had been given permission to stop off at his home to say good-bye. Aliman's eyes were so swollen she had probably been crying all the way. Kasym tried to bear up and seem natural, but it was not easy. And I don't know what made him invent the story: either he did it for Aliman's sake in the hope it would make their parting easier, or else they really did tell him so, but the moment he dismounted he asked us not to go to the station. Kasym said that perhaps he would return home after all, since they had decided not to call up the combine operators and tractor-drivers till the harvest was in. And that if the order was received in time he might still return from the station. Now I realise he was sorry for Aliman, he was sorry for us all. It was nearly a day's journey to the station, and what would the trip home be like? The road would seem endless, there would be only tears, tears and more tears all the way. But then I believed him. They say that while there's life, there's hope. I only began to feel doubtful when we went to see him off at the high road.

On the way, everyone who had worked with Kasym came to bid him farewell. The reapers, the drivers, the threshers - all came running; the combine was nearby, too. Kasym's helpers had stopped it and came running to say good-bye.

They say that when a blacksmith goes off to war he says good-bye to his hammer and anvil. My Kasym was a master, a smith of his trade. When the combine came to a stop he was talking to his fellow villagers. He glanced quickly up the road. The long column of recruits with the horse-drawn wagons and red banner in front had just turned the bend.

"Here, Father, hold him!" Kasym said, handing the reins of his grey pacer to Suvankul as he headed towards the combine. He walked round it, inspecting it from all sides. Then he climbed the steps nimbly to the platform. "Come on, Eshenkul, let her go! Full speed, like we used to!" he shouted to the tractor-driver.

The motors, which had been chugging softly at half-speed, now roared and clattered, the combine thundered, chains clashed and it began devouring the wheat with its reels spewing out a stream of straw from the thresher. Kasym held his face up to the hot wind, he laughed, threw back his shoulders and seemed to have forgotten everything on earth. He and the tractor-driver kept shouting back and forth and nodding; they turned at the end of the field and headed back. The combine flew along the field like a bird of the steppe. For a moment we all forgot about the war. The people stood there with radiant eyes, but Aliman was by far the proudest. She was walking slowly towards the combine, smiling softly. Then it came to a stop. Our faces clouded again. Bektash, our neighbour Aisha's son, who was about thirteen at a time and was working as a helper on the combine, rushed up to Kasym and began hugging him and crying. I bit my lips to keep back the tears. Remembering Suvankul's admonitions, I dared not cry. Kasym raised Bektash in the air, hugged him, set the boy down at the wheel and slowly descended. We crowded round. He said good-bye to his other helpers, the driver and the tractor-driver. He had to hurry. The column on the high road had already drawn abreast of us.

That is how we saw Kasym off. When the moment came for him to mount his horse, Aliman, poor Aliman, paying no heed to her elders or to the children about, cried out and threw her arms around him. Her face was drained of blood, only her eyes burned wildly. We pulled her away. But she rushed towards her husband again. Thus, like a child, she kept dragging at Kasym's hand and would not let him put his foot in the stirrup. She pleaded:

"Wait! Just a minute! Just one more minute!"

Kasym kissed her over and over again and coaxed:

"Don't cry now, Aliman! You'll see, I'll be back from the station tomorrow. Believe me!"

And then Suvankul said to his daughter-in-law:

"Go on, Aliman, you see him to the road. We'll say good-bye here. We won't keep him." Suvankul took his son by the hand and said softly:

"Look me in the eyes."

They looked deep in to each other's eyes. "Did you understand me?" his father said. "Yes, Father, I did," the son answered.

"Godspeed!" With these words, Suvankul mounted his horse and, never once glancing back, galloped off.

As we kissed good-bye, Kasym said:

"If you hear from Maselbek, send me his address." Kasym and Aliman headed towards the road, leading the grey pacer. I could not tear my eyes from them. The column on the high road was disappearing from view. At first Aliman ran alongside, holding on to the stirrup, then Kasym bent down, kissed her for the last time and started his grey off at a quick pace. But Aliman kept on running in the dust of its hoofs. I ran after her and brought her home.

Towards evening of the next day Djainak returned from the station. The pacer was tied to the back of the cart.

## 5

Far off there were battles and blood flowed, but here our work was our battle. Kasym had been right in his warning, for no matter how we hurried snow covered the last of the wheat in the field and on the threshing floor. There were still potatoes under the snow here and there. The men kept leaving in a steady stream, day after day, and all to the frontlines. But we spent all our days on the farm our talk was only of war, of how things were going there. The postman was the most eagerly awaited person in every home.

A week after we saw Kasym off we had a letter from Maselbek. In his first letter he had written that he and the boys he was studying with had been called up but that they were to be stationed in the same city for the time being. He said we should not despair because we had not had a chance to see each other and say goodbye. Who could have known that things would have turned out as they had, there was no use regretting it, the main thing was to return home victorious. His second letter came from Novosibirsk. He wrote that he was attending officers' training school and enclosed a photo of himself. It still hangs in its glass frame on the wall, but it has dulled with time. It is a handsome portrait: his uniform is very becoming. His thick hair is combed straight back and his eyes are rather sad. This is how I still see him when I dream of him. Aliman had only seen Maselbek once, when he had come home for his brother's wedding.



"Mother see what a handsome fellow our Maselbek is," she said looking at his photograph. "That time I only had a peep at him from behind the curtains. I was just a bride and how could I stare at him? I was much too shy. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he came back and found himself a girl as educated as he is, and beautiful, too? Wouldn't that be nice, Mother?"

I agreed and fell to dreaming of the day myself.

I was more or less easy in my mind till the middle of the winter. There were letters from my sons and I was content to have them. But then I received a letter from Kasym, saying that his unit was being moved up to the front. And I became really frightened; now my heart would often miss a beat. On top of that, Suvankul was forever being called to the enlistment office. One day it was for a checkup, another for registration, and yet another for a change in registration. He was completely exhausted, torn between his trips to the enlistment office and his duties as team-leader. Somehow, I never thought Suvankul would be called up. After all, a collective farm was not much good without a team-leader. But he, too, had to go. I learned this when I was at the threshing shed, helping thresh the last of the snow-covered wheat. When I heard the news I stuck my fork into the straw, leaned my head against the cold shaft and just stood there, completely at a loss. What were we to do? How were we to live? Two sons were gone already, now my husband was going, too, and all to the front.

Just then Suvankul himself rode up. He dismounted in silence, came over to me and said:

"Come, let's go home, I have to get my things together."

I rode his horse, while he walked by my side, saying that it would be easier to talk while he walked. But we could not find the right words to say and were silent most of the way. Not that we had nothing to say, but because there was such a weight on our hearts, crushing them in a vice, making each word agony. Thus we proceeded, I on horseback and he walking by my side. Dirty, grey clouds had covered the sky. There was a north wind blowing from Yellow Valley, the ground wind was picking up force, and the whistling meant a snow-storm was on the way. I looked round. The field lay dismal and bare. There were no people, no sounds, no movement, it was cold and gloomy.

Suvankul smoked one cigarette after another as he walked. Then he took my hand.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

I did not answer. He seemed about to say something, but changed his mind. Perhaps he wanted to share his thoughts with me. "Here, you see, I'm going after the boys. Who knows how things will turn out, whether fate will bring me back again or not. . . Perhaps we're parting forever. If that's the case, well, we've lived together in joy and friendship for so many years. Let us forgive each other any harsh words. After all, who knows what's in store?" I don't know whether these were the words he wanted to say to me. Perhaps he wanted to say something else. But at the time he only stood there gazing at me, saying

nothing, biting his lip. I suddenly realised there were grey hairs in his dark moustache. Somehow I had not noticed them before.

I recalled how Suvankul and I had met on this very field when we were young, how we had toiled here for twenty-two years, raising our children, growing wheat, and now our whole life together was passing before my eyes. I never thought, I never dreamt that this is how we would part, perhaps forever. I recalled how one summer night on the first day of reaping we had come along this very same road on horseback. Now I saw the new street at the edge of the village abandoned and deserted, I saw the pile of rocks and bricks in Aliman and Kasym's yard and I fell forward on the horse's mane and wept. I wept a long time. Suvankul waited patiently in silence and then said:

"Tolgonai, cry your heart out now, all at once, there's no one here. But from now on don't let anyone see your tears. You're not only head of the house with Aliman and Djainak to care for, you'll have to take over my job as team-leader as well. There's no one else."

I wept still harder than before.

"What in the world do I need your job for? How can you even talk of such things at a time like this? I don't want it. I don't even want to hear about it!"

That very evening they summoned me to the farm office. A wounded veteran named Usenbai, our new chairman, was there, as were Suvankul and several old men, the village elders. Usenbai did not waste his words.

"No matter what you say, Auntie Tolgonai, you'll have to tighten your belt like a man and saddle the team-leader's horse. No one knows our land and our water and the people of our village better than you. We put our trust in you and especially so because this trust is shared by our best team-leader whom we are now seeing off to the front, though this hurts us greatly. There is nothing we can do. That's how it is. You start tomorrow, Auntie Tolgonai."

The elders advised me to accept. They finally talked me into it, and I agreed to be a team-leader. How could I refuse? I certainly understood what the times were like. What I did was right, if only because it was the last wish of my Suvankul. That night he did not sleep at all, but kept instructing me. Start getting ready for spring, let the draught animals rest, repair the ploughs and the harrows and the carts. Look after the large families and after the old people. Do this, do that. . . Oh, my restless man, my dear husband, my dearest friend. . .

And the blizzard kept raging all night, with the wind howling in the chimney.

We saw Suvankul off to the high road. He climbed into Djainak's cart together with several other middle-aged men and they disappeared into the swirling snow. Oh, how cold it was, a piercing wind burned my face. I walked along slowly, looking back all the time, sobbing and weeping.

From that day on, as our chairman Usenbai had said, I tightened my belt, saddled my horse and took over the duties of team-leader. Even now this is no easy job, not everyone can handle it, but at that time it was sheer torture. There were no able-bodied men left, just the sick and the lame, and the women, young girls, children and old men had to do the work. Everything we raised went to the front. We had to manage with wagons that were missing wheels, with harness patched together from odds and ends, with broken yokes and a smithy in which there was no coal. We began making charcoal from the prickly branches we gathered in the dry valley to keep the forge going. Life was not what it used to be, now hunger was knocking at our doors. Yet, we did our best to keep up the collective farm, we all put our shoulders to the wheel. I had a kind word for some and scolded others; at times it nearly came to hair-pulling. There were all sorts of people, I went through so much then. Yet, I still bow low to my people, because in that hour of trial they did not scatter but held together, they were a people. The women of those days, today's old women, and the children, now the mothers and fathers of families, have probably forgotten those days, but every time I see them I recall them as they were then. They appear in my mind's eye as they were: ragged and hungry. How they worked on the collective farm, how they yearned for victory, how they wept and still found courage! They don't suspect that their actions then have become immortal. And never, no matter what I had to endure, no matter how I staggered under my burden, never will I regret that I was team-leader. I was up at the crack of dawn and off to the farm, spending the whole day in the saddle, going back and forth between the steppe and the mountains; from evening till late at night I was in the farm office, and so did not notice the days flying by. Perhaps that is what saved me. And though there were times when the people felt bitter towards me, either from sorrow or resentment, when they were ready to throttle me or leave their jobs, I did not take offence. No, I would simply pile more of the work on Djainak and Aliman, they had no rest night or day, and I do not regret having worked them so mercilessly. If I had not, we would have succumbed to fear and depression, for three men had gone off to war from one family - could we help thinking of that? There had not been a single word from Kasym in two months. Aliman and I avoided each other's eyes to keep from speaking aloud our terrifying thoughts of Kasym. If we did talk, it was of this or that, of our work or the household affairs. We were like children, trying to avoid the subject.

One winter morning I set out for the smithy to help reshoe our draught horses. I spotted Usenbai. He galloped up with a small piece of paper in his hand. He said it was an urgent telegram for me. I caught my breath. All I could hear was the sound of hammers beating on the anvils, but it was as though they were striking on my chest. I must have looked terrible.

"Auntie Tolgonai!" the chairman shouted. "It's all right, it's a telegram from Maselbek. It's from Novosibirsk. Come on, take it, don't be afraid!" And leaning down from the saddle he handed me the paper. "You'd better start out for the station," he added. "Your son is going to pass through, he wants to see you, he wants you to meet him there. I've ordered a cart for you and they'll take along some hay and oats for the horses. Don't stand there, hurry, get ready to leave!"

What a wave of joy enveloped me! I bustled about the smithy, not knowing what to do. The smiths finally chased me out.

"We'll manage without you. Hurry to the station, you don't want to be late."

And so I ran home. My thoughts were all jumbled. The only clear thought was that Maselbek wanted me to come to the station, that Maselbek wanted to see me. As I ran down the street I felt hot from the frost, I was drenched in sweat. I kept talking to myself as I ran, as if I were insane.

"What does that mean: he wants me to see him? Why, my dearest boy, I would run a thousand miles just to see you!"

Mother is always a mother ... I did not stop to think then which way my son was heading.

I came running home, hurriedly threw some food together and cooked some meat, for Maselbek was certainly not alone, his friends were with him, now he would be able to treat them to some home cooking. I packed everything into a saddle-bag and that very day Aliman and I started out for the station. At first I wanted to take Djainak along, but he himself refused.

"No, Mother," he said, "let Aliman go instead. I'll stay home and take care of the house. That'll be better."

Later I realised that my youngest son had done the right thing. Though he was only a boy, he was no fool. He understood what Aliman was going through then, how worried she was and how wretched she felt. Djainak ran over to the haylofts where Aliman was working and called to her. It had been a long time since I had seen my daughter-in-law so happy. She beamed, her eyes were radiant, she was more flustered than I and began to hurry me.

"Come, Mother, hurry up! Here's your coat, here's your warm shawl, get dressed and we'll start off!"

She was restless all the way.

"Make them go faster!" she urged the driver. At times she would grab the reins from him and with a shout would race the horses.

The cart rolled along the packed snow, the horses trotted briskly, the wheels swished softly on the greased axles. It snowed all the way, a steady, merry snow. The air was frosty. Aliman was covered with snow, she didn't know how becoming it was. The heavy snowflakes stuck to her head, to her shawl, to strands of her hair, and to her collar, enhancing her wheat-golden complexion and rosy cheeks, her shining black eyes and white teeth. In one's youth everything is becoming, even snow. Aliman kept chattering all the way. First she asked me not to say anything when Maselbek got off the train, to see if he would recognise her or not. Then she said she'd creep up from behind and clap her hands over his eyes: what would he say, would he be scared, he'd probably ask who was acting so silly. And she giggled at her own ideas. Oh, Aliman, Aliman, my sweet daughter-in-law! Did she really think I never guessed

why she was behaving so? But she gave herself away. Suddenly she fell silent, stopped laughing and murmured:

"Maselbek looks so much like Kasym. They're just like twins, aren't they?"

I pretended I hadn't heard. She said nothing more. Then she grabbed the reins from the boy again and shouted at the horses.

We reached the station towards evening. As soon as the cart came to a stop Aliman and I ran to the track, as if Maselbek were arriving any minute. Everything was deserted. We looked around dejectedly, standing there like orphans, not knowing where to go or what to do next. The wind ripped along between the rails and over the sleepers. An engine was crawling back and forth, shaking the frost-covered, ice-bound cars with a clanging and grating of iron. The wind whistled in the wires.

We had never been to meet a train before, we didn't even think of asking anyone when the train was due. Meanwhile, we heard a whistle in the distance and a train appeared.

"It's coming, Mother!" Aliman said.

My knees began to shake, I felt frightened. The train was approaching rapidly. The engine passed us in a cloud of snow dust. It stopped. We ran alongside the crowded cars. There were women, children and soldiers inside. Who knew who they were or where they were going? We stopped at each car to ask:

"Is Maselbek Suvankulov here? Can you tell us if Maselbek Suvankulov is here?"

Some said they didn't know, others were silent and some just smiled. While we were running up and down, the train pulled out of the station, it was only a three minute stop. We just stood there, as if we had let a bird escape from our hands. An elderly Russian railway man in a black sheepskin coat and felt boots came over to us. I noticed him when he had come out to meet the train. He asked us whom we were waiting for. We told him and showed him Maselbek's telegram. He put on his glasses and moved his lips slowly as he read. Then he said:

"Your son is on a troop train. But who knows which one it is, or when it's due here. If it's not late, it should be here tonight or tomorrow. But maybe it's already gone through. There are so many troop trains going through here every day and some don't even stop."

We were crestfallen.

"It's all this war," the man said and sighed. "It's turned everything upside-down. Now what's the use of standing here in the wind? Go on into the station house, there's a waiting-room there. Stay inside, and whenever a train comes in you go out and meet it. That's the only thing to do."

There were about ten people in the waiting-room.

They were lying on the benches. Life had probably driven them about its roads and stations, they had probably become used to wandering and felt at home here. Some were sound asleep, others were talking or smoking, two men in a corner were drinking boiling water from tin cups, burning themselves and blowing on the water, while another was strumming a guitar and singing softly to himself. An oil lamp with a broken sooty glass nickered and smoked. We looked about in the semidarkness and sat down on the edge of a bench. After a while we heard the sound of a train and made a dash for the door. In the darkness the wind tore at our sleeves and whipped at the hems of our coats. The train was made up entirely of freight cars. We could not see any soldiers, but we ran alongside shouting:

"Is Maselbek Suvankulov here?" "Maselbek Suvankulov!"

No one answered, there was no one there. When we returned to the station-house everyone else was asleep.

"Mother, lie down for a while and rest. I'll watch for the train," Aliman said.

I rested my head on my daughter-in-law's shoulder and thought I could doze, but I couldn't. How could I sleep? And how could I even think of sleep if not only my ears, but my heart and mind were all listening for the approaching trains. Even my feet felt the first faint rumble of the floor, making me start. No matter which direction a train was coming from, we jumped up, grabbed the saddle-bag and rushed outside.

Troop trains passed, but Maselbek was not on any of them. At midnight the ground began to tremble again, we jumped up and ran outside. The shrill blasts of train whistles sounded from both sides of the gorge at once, two trains were approaching from different sides. We became flustered and ran back and forth and then found ourselves between the two tracks. The trains were moving upon each other with a deafening roar, and, continuously gathering speed, passed each other. The wheels clattered, the wind howled and caught us in a snowy whirlwind, trying to suck us under the wheels.

"Mother!" Aliman screamed and grabbing hold of me, pressed me to a lamppost, her arms wound tightly around me.

I peered into the windows as they flew by. What if I saw Maselbek, what if my son was there and I didn't know it? The rails groaned under the racing wheels, and my heart echoed it, gripped with terror for my son. The trams were gone in a cloud of snow, while we stood pressed to the lamppost for a long while after.

We did not sit down once that night, running back and forth along the length of the troop trains. Just before dawn, when the snow-storm suddenly died down, a strange-looking train pulled into the station from the West. All the cars were charred, the roofs were torn off and the doors had been blown out.

There was not a living soul in the entire train. The empty cars were as still as a graveyard, they smelled of smoke, of burnt iron, charred wood and paint.

Our acquaintance of the day before, the railway man in the black sheepskin coat, came up with a lantern.

"What train is this?" Aliman asked in a whisper.

"It was bombed." He too, spoke in a whisper.

"Where is it going?"

"To be repaired."

As I listened to them I thought of the ones who had been in the train, who had parted with their lives in the midst of smoke, screams and flames, of those whose arms and legs had been blown off, who had been deafened and blinded for life. But these bombs were only a faint echo of war. What was war itself like then?

The bombed train stood at the station for a long time, then it started up soundlessly and with a mournful rattle it moved off. I looked after it with a heavy heart: now Maselbek was to go to where this bombed train had come from. And how was Kasym? How was Suvankul? He had written that he was stationed somewhere near Ryazan. And that was probably not too far from the front.

Morning dawned. It was time to leave, there was no more hay for the horses. But what if Maselbek had not passed through yet, what then? We had waited so long, it would be so awful. We thought it over and we dared not leave.

The weather was as it had been the day before, cold and windy. It was hardly surprising that the station in the gorge was known as the caravanserai of the winds. Suddenly the clouds parted and the sun peeped through. "Oh," I thought, "if only my son could flash by suddenly, as the sun coming out from behind the clouds, if I could only catch a glimpse of him."

And then we heard the rumble of a train in the distance. It was coming from the East. Two loud blasts from the whistle swept across the gorge.

The ground beneath our feet began to tremble, the rails hummed. Two black engines with red wheels roared through the clouds of smoke and steam and hot flames, pulling platforms with tanks and big guns wrapped in tarpaulin, with guards standing by them in sheepskin coats carrying rifles, with soldiers grouped around the open doors of the heated freight cars that were flashing by one after the other. As the cars passed we caught glimpses of faces, greatcoats, snatches of songs, words, accordions and

balalaikas. We stood frozen to the spot. Then a man carrying red and yellow signal flags came running over and shouted right in our ears:

"It's not going to stop! It won't stop! Get out of the way!" and he began pushing us. And then someone shouted: "Mama-a-a! Alima-a-an!"

It was he! It was Maselbek! Oh, my God, my God! He was flying past, so close, so close! He was hanging on to the door-hinge with one hand, his whole body leaning out of the car, waving his hat in his free hand, shouting, bidding us farewell. All I remember is that I screamed "Maselbek!" In that instant I saw him so vividly, so clearly: the wind had dishevelled his hair, the flaps of his greatcoat were like beating wings, and his face and eyes - joy and sorrow, regret and farewell! Never once taking my eyes from him I began running after the train. The last car roared past, but I kept on running along the sleepers till I fell. Oh, how I moaned I was saying good-bye to him, hugging the cold iron rail. The clatter of the wheels was becoming fainter and fainter, then it died away completely.

Even now I sometimes hear the troop train roaring through my head, and the clatter of the wheels remains with me for long afterwards.

Aliman came running towards me, tears streaming down her face. She crouched down next to me, vainly trying to raise me with her trembling hands as she sobbed her heart out. Just then a Russian woman, a railway worker came over to us. And she, too, cried, "Mother! Mother!" and hugged me and wept. Together they led me to the embankment, and as we headed towards the station building Aliman handed me a soldier's hat.

"Here, Mother," she said. "Maselbek left it for you. He had thrown me his hat as I was running after the train.

I rode home in the cart, pressing the hat close to my heart all the way.

His hat still hangs on the wall at home. It's just an ordinary soldier's grey fur hat with a star in the middle over the forehead. Sometimes I take it down, press my face into it to try to bring back the smell of my son.

6

"Tell me dear Earth, when has a mother suffered so, only to catch a brief glimpse of her son?"

"I don't know, Tolgonai. The world has never known a war such as the one you lived through."

"Then may I be the last mother to ever wait so for her son. May no other mother ever have to hug rails of iron and beat her head against the sleepers."



"When you returned home it was obvious you had not been with your son. Your face was sallow and there were deep rings under your tortured eyes, as if you had been through a long illness."

"And I would rather have been stricken with fever."

"My poor Tolgonai. Your head turned grey that year. How heavy and beautiful your braids had been until then. But now you were silent and withdrawn. You would come here in silence and leave with clenched teeth. But I understood. I could tell by your eyes that each time it was more difficult for you."

"Yes, Mother-Earth, life can change a person like that. It was not I alone. There is not a single family, not a single person whom war has not seized by the throat. And when the black-edged papers came, the death notices, when there would be wailing and weeping in two or three houses of the village at a time, then my blood would boil, thirst for revenge would blind my eyes and sear my heart, I am proud that during those days I was a team-leader, suffering my own sorrow and the sorrow of others, sharing with my people all the travail, their hunger and hardships. That is why I survived, I survived for the others. If not for that I would have fallen, and the war would have trampled me to dust. I realised then that there was only one way to conquer war and that was to fight, to struggle, to triumph, The alternative was death! That is why, my dearest field, I always came here on horseback and never troubled you, greeting you silently and turning away in silence."

7

Then one day we had a letter from Kasym. I jumped on my horse and galloped headlong over the ditches and the snow-drifts, the letter in my hand. Aliman and Djainak were spreading manure in the field and I shouted to them:

"*Suiunchu, suiunchu* - oh what joy!"

My happiness was their happiness. We had not had a single line from Kasym in two months, we did not know what had happened to him. In his letter he wrote that twice he had defended the approaches to Moscow and both times had come out alive. He wrote that the Germans had been stopped, that their fangs had been cut. Now his regiment was being sent behind the lines to rest up.

How happy Aliman was! She jumped off the cart and came racing towards me, overtaking Djainak on the way.

"Mother, honey for thy tongue!" She grabbed the letter with shaking hands, beside herself with joy. She couldn't even read it, repeating over and over again: "He's alive! He's alive and well!"

Other women came running, they crowded round her.

"Aliman, read it! What does your husband write? Maybe he's written something about our men."

And she replied:

"Wait a second, wait!" But she could not read a single line.

Djainak could wait no longer.

"Here, give it to me! The people want to know what he writes." He took the letter from her and began reading aloud.

Aliman, meanwhile, squatted down and began putting handfuls of snow to her forehead. When Djainak finished reading, she rose, forgetting even to wipe her face. There she stood, flushed with happiness, the rivulets of snow melting on her face.

"Well, let's get back to work!" she said softly and started slowly across the snow.

As she walked along, she looked about thoughtfully. Who knows what thoughts were crossing her mind then, perhaps she was remembering how she had run across the stubble in the summer, carrying a pitcher to her husband; or how Kasym had said farewell to his combine here. I felt she was reliving all that was dear to her, all her treasured memories. Her eyes glittered and dimmed in turn. She kept looking towards the high road and was probably seeing again in her mind's eye the grey pacer disappearing into the distance and herself running after Kasym.

Djainak walked beside her. He began to tease her.

"Wake up! Come to your senses. You'll be the laughing-stock of the village. You couldn't even read your letter! Wait till I write to Kasym and tell him I had to send his wife back to school again to learn the alphabet!"

Aliman began pummeling him, then they raced towards the cart, chasing after each other.

I followed them, deep in thought. Who else was to defend the people if not such *djigits* as my sons, I said to myself. If only they returned home unharmed and victorious. Everything else could be endured. Who cared if we were all just skin and bones so long as we lived to see victory? Oh, if only it were soon! And because this was not only my wish, but the dream and goal of the entire people, I endured all, I could accept anything.

Even when my last and youngest son Djainak went off to the front, and he was not yet eighteen, I clenched my teeth, said nothing and accepted it in silent suffering.

Towards the end of winter they began summoning him frequently to the enlistment office for drills. Not him alone, but many other boys as well. Well, this was nothing out of the ordinary, and I was not very worried. They'd march them around there for about ten days and then send them all home again. But once he came back home after he'd been gone only a day.

"Why did they let you go so soon?" I asked in surprise, "Or are you through for good now?"

"No, Mother, I'll leave again tomorrow. They let me come home for a day. This time we'll be there a bit longer, so don't worry."

And I believed him, never suspecting anything. He behaved strangely that day, as if he were preparing for a long journey. He walked around with a hammer and nails all morning, hammering and fixing things. Then he chopped a pile of firewood, carted the manure to the backyard and raked and dried the hay that was spread out on the roof. When I came home in the evening I saw that he had swept the yard and fixed the broken crib. We had used it when Suvankul was home for he liked to have his horse at hand.

"Why are you wasting your time, Djainak? You'll fix it in the summer," I said.

He replied that a job had to be done when one had the time, because there were always too many things to do later. And even then I didn't put two and two together didn't have an inkling of what he meant. For he had volunteered as a Komsomol member for front-line service. We only found out when Djainak was on his way. He sent us back a note from the station. That was no way to do it, my poor sweet son, for even though you wrote us a letter you should never have left without saying good-bye. No matter if I would have been beside myself with grief, you should have told me anyway. In his letter he asked Aliman and me to forgive him for leaving without a word. He said it was easier that way, to cut everything off with a single blow. He said he wanted to spare us worry and anxiety, that if we discovered everything at once, we'd be resigned to his decision and agree with him. Who knows, perhaps he was right. It certainly would have been difficult for him to have told me outright; or maybe he was afraid I'd start weeping and pleading with him to remain.

Now, when I have lost him and when so many years have passed, I speak with him as I do with my Mother Earth.

"Djainak, listen to what I have to say! May your conscience not trouble you, you have not hurt me. I forgave you there and then, Djainak, my youngest little son, my dearest little boy, my merry sunshine! Don't you think I understood why you left without saying good-bye, why you left me all alone, why you left your childhood, your youth, and your future life? You were a mischievous, noisy boy, but not everyone knew how you loved people. You could not look upon our sufferings dispassionately and so you left. You so wanted people to remain human, to keep war from maiming the live, compassionate soul in us or burning all kindness and generosity away. You did everything within your power to prevent this from happening. Only kind deeds live on. Every thing else disappears. Your kind deeds live on also. You perished long ago, you were declared missing in action. You wrote that you were a paratrooper, that you had been behind enemy lines three times. And then, one dark night in 1944, you jumped from your plane together with your comrades to come to the aid of the partisans and were reported missing in action. No one knows whether you were killed in battle or by a stray bullet, or captured, or drowned in the swamplands. But if you had survived we would have had at least one word from you in all these

years. Thus, Djainak, you, too, were lost. You were so young when you left, only eighteen, and didn't leave much of a memory behind in people's minds. But I remember you and always think of how you left for the front, never daring to tell me, because you loved me and wanted to spare me. I recall how you once gave a boy at the station your sheepskin coat. You noticed an evacuated family, a mother and her four children, and you gave the eldest boy who had nothing warm on your sheepskin coat. And you came home in your jacket with chattering teeth. Maybe now that he is a grown man, he sometimes remembers you as the boy who gave him his coat, for you are now much younger than he. But you were his teacher. For kindness does not lie along the roadside, you do not come upon it there by chance. One human being teaches another kindness."

Oh, what's the use of talking now, words won't help. The war has carried away so many people. If not for the war, what a handsome, kind person my Djainak would have been!

"My son, how it hurts me to think that of the twelve flowers of life you had no time to pick even one. You were only just beginning to live. I don't even know which girl you liked best."

The last candle is burning in my soul. Soon it, too, will go out. But I remember everything, I remember that terrible day the old man came for me when we were ploughing.

It was early spring. The snowdrops were still blooming and we were harrowing. A warm wind was blowing from Yellow Valley, the autumn plough-land was drying and the grass was bright green in the sun.

We had just begun the ploughing that day. I rode my horse slowly behind the tractor, breathing in the earthy smell of the furrow and thinking that it had been a very long time since I had had word from either Suvankul or Kasym.

Mean while, one of the village elders rode up; he seemed in no special hurry. I said to him:

"You have come at the right time, *aksakal*. Bless us with the start of the ploughing."

He spread his palms, stroked his beard and whispered:

"May Dyikan-baba, patron of the tillers, be with you may the harvest be as the river at flood-time." And then he said to me: "Tolgonai, someone from the district wants to see you. He said you should go to the office. I've come for you."

"All right, let's go."

We rode over to the plough men, and I told them I'd be back in the evening to see how much they'd done. Then we headed towards the village. There was nothing strange about someone from the district

summoning me. It was a common thing, quite a few representatives came to the village at the start of the sowing. We rode along slowly, talking of various things, of life in general, and the old man said:

"Thank you, Tolgonai, for serving your people in such terrible times. Though you are a woman, we all look to you for guidance. Keep it up, Tolgonai, hold fast to the reins. In times of trial you can rely on us, and we shall rely on you. We know only too well how hard things have been for you. A person's life is like a mountain path, going up and down and then suddenly coming upon a chasm. You cannot always make it alone, but if everyone lends a hand, you will get over it. That's how things are in this life of ours."

By now we were riding down the street and I saw a crowd of people outside our yard. I saw their heads beyond the mud wall, but for some reason or other I did not attach any great importance to this. Then the old man suddenly took my reins and said, avoiding my eyes:

"Get down, Tolgonai. You'll have to get down." I looked at him in surprise. He dismounted, took me by the hand and repeated:

"You'll have to get down, Tolgonai."

Still I could not understand what it was all about. But I was gripped by a terrible premonition and slowly slid down from the saddle, more dead than alive. I saw Aliman approaching the house with three women. They had been cleaning the ditches that day. Aliman was carrying her hoe over her shoulder. One of the women took it from her. And then I understood.

"What's the matter? Why are you all here?" I screamed.

At the sound of my screams women came running from my neighbour Aisha's yard. They came towards me quickly and silently, took me by the hands and said:

"Be brave, Tolgonai. We have lost our dear falcons. Suvankul and Kasym have been killed."

I heard Aliman cry out and then all the women began to wail:

"*Boorumoi*-our brothers! *Boorumoi*!"

I heard nothing after that, I became completely deaf in an instant. I was probably deafened by my own screams. The street began to spin, I felt the trees and the houses falling. In the dead silence the clouds flashed by me and gave way to strange, distorted silent faces. I tried to break free, to pull my hands away from the hands gripping me so tightly. I could not understand who it was that was holding me, and why there was a crowd at the gates. I saw only Aliman. I saw her with merciless clarity. She looked terrible, with blood streaming down her face, her hair flying wildly and her dress torn. The women were trying to restrain her, twisting her arms behind her back, but she was struggling towards me with all her

might and screaming so loudly I could not even hear her. I, too, was pulling towards her. I had only one desire, to come to her aid as quickly as possible. But it seemed like an eternity before we finally came together. And only then, when Aliman threw her arms around my neck, did I finally hear her hoarse, heartrending cry:

"Mother! We're widows, Mother! Miserable widows! Our sun has gone out! Our day's turned black! Mother! Our day's turned black!"

Yes, we were widows now. Two widows, a mother and her daughter-in-law, we were bewailing our fate, embracing each other, our bitter tears flowing together.

But our mourning was cut short. On the seventh day the collective farmers gathered at our house to pay tribute once again to the memory of the dead. They said:

"Even a year's mourning would not be enough. We shall always remember them, but the living must go on living. May the years that were coming to them go to Maselbek and Djainak." (We were getting letters from Djainak nearly every week then.) "May they return victorious. We have come to ask you to return to work. It's the sowing season now, the earth will not wait. Steel your hearts. Come and join us. And may this be our vengeance on the enemy."

Aliman and I talked it over and agreed with our people.

The next morning, as we were getting ready to leave for work, our chairman Usenbai brought us two slips of paper. He said they were the death notices and that we should receive them. The notice of Kasym's death had arrived at the farm three weeks before. He had been killed in the village of Orekhovka during the offensive outside Moscow. While they were deciding how to break the news to us, they had received notice of Suvankul's death. He had also been killed during a major offensive near the town of Yelets. Our fellow-villagers had had no choice but to tell us the truth. And they were faced with the task of doing it all at once.

There is nothing much to tell of the events that followed. Once again I tightened my belt and once again I saddled the team-leader's horse.

What would have come of Aliman if I had wailed and moaned, berating my fate? She was so grief-stricken it frightened me. My grief was no less than hers, for I had lost both my husband and my son, my loss was twice as great as hers, yet it was different. No matter how you looked at it, Suvankul and I had had a long life together. We had seen and been through a lot, there had been both difficult and happy times. We had had our children, our family, and had worked side by side. And if not for the war, we would have lived out our lives together. But what had Aliman and Kasym known? Life for them was all in the future, all in their dreams and plans. The axe of war had cut them down in the very bloom of youth. Certainly, time would heal Aliman's wounded heart. There are many good people on earth, perhaps, in time, she would find a man she might even love. And life would then have returned with fresh hopes.

Other war widows went this way. When the war ended they married again. Some were happy, some were not, but they were not alone, all of them are wives and mothers now. Many of them have found true happiness. But not all people are alike. There are those that forget their grief quickly and quickly change over to another path, while others merely mark time, painfully and desperately, unable to find the strength to leave their memories behind. It was Aliman's ill luck to be one of the latter. She could not forget the past, she could not accept her fate. In a way, I am to blame. I was too weak, I could not overcome my compassion for her.

That spring our team was digging the main irrigation ditches. I was also working there. One day we finished early, before sunset, and the people began drifting homewards. I had to have a few words with the ploughmen whose tent was not far off and told Aliman not to wait for me. They were just sitting down to supper. I spoke to them about the work at hand and went outside. As I was about to mount my horse I noticed Aliman. She had not gone home, but had stayed behind alone and was walking along the fallow land, picking tulips. For she loved flowers like a little girl. Oh, Aliman, Aliman, my dear helpless daughter-in-law. She had picked about a dozen large tulips and was probably going to bring them home. When I saw her with the flowers a hot sweat covered my brow. I remembered how she had gathered the wild hollyhocks at the edge of the field and had stood holding them just the same way. Then, however, she had had on a red kerchief and her flowers were pink and white, while now she had on a black kerchief and the flowers were red. This was the only difference. But how it cut across my heart! Aliman, meanwhile, raised her eyes and looked about. Then she dropped her head and stared at the flowers dejectedly, as if saying: who are they for now? Where shall I take them? Suddenly she fell to the ground and began tearing the tulips to bits, whipping them against the earth. After a while she became still, her head cradled on her arms, her shoulders jerking. I hid behind the tent, not wanting her to see me. I thought that if I let her cry she might feel better. But she jumped to her feet and dashed across the meadow to the high road. I became frightened, mounted my horse and followed her. I was terrified to see her running away, running across the red field in her black kerchief.

"Aliman! Stop! What's the matter? Stop, Aliman!" I shouted, but she did not stop.

She reached the road along which the grey pacer had once galloped away, and it was only here that I caught up with her.

"Mother! Don't say a word. Mother, don't say anything! Please don't!" I reined in my horse and she ran up, grabbed its mane, buried her head in my skirt and sobbed. I said nothing. What could I say? Then she raised her head, her face was streaked with mud and tears, and said through her sobs:

"Mother, see how the sun is shining. Look how beautiful the sky is, and the steppe is covered with flowers! But Kasym will never return, will he? He'll never return."

"No, he'll never return," I said. Aliman sighed.

"Forgive me, Mother," she said softly. "I wanted to run away and die there together with him."

I could not bear it any longer and began to weep but I said nothing. If I had been a wiser and more practical mother I should have said right there and then: "Are you a baby? You're not the only one, look how many young women like you have been widowed. You can't even count them. Try to take hold of yourself. No matter how terrible this may sound - try to forget Kasym. You can't bring back what is gone forever. In time you'll find someone you can love. If you don't get a grip on yourself, you'll suffer all the more. Don't you dare punish yourself like this. You're still young, your life is still ahead of you." Now I regret not having dared to tell her this crude truth, the only real truth. And later, how many times the opportunity presented itself and the words were on the tip of my tongue, but I never had the courage to utter them. Some irresistible force always held them back. And Aliman herself never wanted to listen to me. Yes, every word has its own day, the only time when it is as pliable as red-hot iron. If you miss your cue, the word will cool, it will turn to stone and press upon your heart as a heavy weight which cannot easily be thrown off. This is what I say now, when so many years have elapsed, but then, amidst the turmoil of everyday life, the cares and needs of our collective farm, there was no time to sit down and think things out clearly. All our hopes were focused on a single thought: if only victory were just around the corner, if only the war would end quickly, then there would be time for everything else. We thought that as soon as the war ended everything would naturally fall into place. But that is not how things turned out.

8

"Mother-Earth, why do the mountains not fall, why do the lakes not overflow when men such as Suvankul and Kasym perish? Both father and son were great tillers. From the beginning of time the world has existed through the efforts of such people, they feed it and nourish it, and in time of war they defend it, they are the first to answer a call to arms. How much both Suvankul and Kasym would have accomplished if not for the war! How many more people would have benefited by fruits of their labour, how many more fields would have been sown, how much more grain would have been threshed. And they themselves, rewarded a hundredfold by the labour of their fellow-men, how much more happiness they would have known! Tell me, Mother Earth, tell me truthfully: can people live without wars?"

"This is a difficult question, Tolgonai. There were peoples who vanished without a trace in the wars of the past, there were cities razed by fire and buried by sand. There were centuries when I dreamed of seeing the traces of a human being. Every time the people would begin to war against each other I would say: 'Stop! Do not shed each other's blood!' And now again I repeat these words: 'You people beyond the mountains and the seas! You people of the world, what is it you need - land? Here I am, the Earth! I am here for all of you, and you are all equal in my eyes. I do not need your quarrels, I need your friendship and your toil! Throw one grain into a furrow and I shall give you a hundred. Plant a stick and I shall grow you a tree. Plant an orchard and I shall shower you with fruit. Breed cattle and I shall be grass. Build houses and I shall be the walls. Breed and multiply, and I shall be a wonderful home for you all. I am infinite, I am deep and high and broad, there is enough of me for everyone!' And you, Tolgonai, you ask whether people can live without wars. That depends upon you people, not me, upon your will and your sound reason."



"Dear Earth, your best workers, your best craftsmen are carried off by war. I do not agree to this, I am against it body and soul! People can, people must bar the way to war."

"Tolgonai, do you think I do not suffer from these wars? Oh, but I suffer cruelly. I miss the farmer's hands, I forever mourn for my children, my tillers, I am always so terribly in need of Suvankul, of Kasym, of Djainak and all the fallen soldiers. When I remain unploughed, when my fields are not reaped and the grain is not threshed I call out to them: 'Where are you, my ploughmen? Where are you, my sowers? Arise, my children, my tillers! Come, help me, I am suffocating, I am dying!' And if only Suvankul would come with his hoe in hand, if Kasym would drive up in his combine and Djainak in his cart! But they do not answer."

"Thank you, Earth, for what you have said. Then you miss them as badly as I do, you mourn them as I do. Thank you, Earth."

9

The third and fourth years of war brought their joys and hardships: the enemy was being driven farther and farther back, our hearts sang with joy, but our troubles were mounting with each passing day. It was still bearable in autumn when we gathered the fallen ears of grain amidst the stubble and dug potatoes in our gardens, but towards the middle of the winter hunger would come to stay. Things could not have been worse in spring and in the bright days of early summer. Some families barely eked out an existence living on wild roots, grass and water with a bit of milk added for colour. Aliman and I both worked, and there were no young ones hanging on to our skirts. It would have been better if there had been. It was heart-breaking to see the children from large families, their bellies swollen and their faces puffed with hunger, looking into your hands, silently begging for food. If someone had said: "Go to the front and die there, and then the war will end and the children will no longer be hungry," I would not have hesitated a moment. Just to be spared the sight of their hungry eyes. Once I said this to Aliman. She looked at me and replied:

"I would do the same. What hurts most is that the children do not understand why they must starve. We grown-ups at least can find consolation, we know the reason, we know there must be an end to this some time. But the children do not understand. Until their fathers return it is we who must provide for them. This is all that is left to us, Mother. If not for this, there would be no sense in living."

Everything belonged to the war: our lives, our labour and will and even the children's porridge - everything down to the tiniest drop vanished into the unsatiable gullet of war. Yet, there were people who refused to sacrifice anything for the war effort; there's no use hiding the fact, there were such people. They, too, snatched the food from our mouths.

Once I lost my way. It happened in 'forty-three. I think it was mid-winter. No, it was towards the end of winter. There were dark patches of ground in the steppe, but the windows still froze over during the night.

Who knows what time it was, everyone has long since gone to bed, when someone began banging on the window so hard I thought it would break.

"Tolgonai! Get up! Wake up!" someone was shouting.

Aliman and I both leapt from our beds in fright.

"Mother!" Aliman whispered tremulously in the dark, as if she were waiting for a miracle to happen.

Oh, that cursed, never-ending hope! My heart skipped a beat from terror and a vague joy: "Perhaps one of our men has come back?" and I pressed my face to the window.

"Who's there? Who is it?"

"Hurry, Tolgonai! Hurry! They've driven off our horses!" the voice beyond the window shouted.

While Aliman lit the lamp I pulled on my boots, put on my coat and rushed out. We ran towards the stables and found the chairman and many of the villagers already there. We learned that thieves had stolen three horses including our own grey pacer whom I had given to the farm. These were the best geldings we had, we were getting them ready for the spring ploughing. The stableman said he had gone to the hay-loft to get some hay for the midnight feed. When he came back the lantern was out and the stable was dark. He thought the wind had blown it out and slowly lit it again. Then he noticed that the three end stalls were empty.

In those days three work horses lost to the farm were the same as losing ten tractors today. But it was also as if each soldier at the front had been deprived of his daily bread ration. We saddled our horses, some took along their rifles and we set out in pursuit. Had we caught up with the thieves there would have been no mercy for them. No, we certainly would have shown no mercy!

On the outskirts of the village we broke up into small groups and rode off in different directions. I was riding a pedigree stallion, hot-blooded and sinewy and straining at the reins. I let him have his head and recall that we raced across the high road and towards the mountains. Two other riders were following me. When I looked back they were gone. Either they or I had turned off at some point. It was not hard to go astray, for though the moon was out, its light was deceptive, and everything was blackness twenty paces away. My only thought was of catching the thieves. I was so upset and vexed I did not notice where my horse was taking me, and when he suddenly came to a stop I realised we were at the edge of a deep ravine. These were the foot-hills of the mountains. The moon was passing cautiously over the dark ridge, the stars shone dimly. There was not a light anywhere. A sharp wind rustled the dry sage and whistled shrilly. Owls hooted on the ruins of an old clay tomb.

I rode down into the ravine. There was not a sound. A startled fox dashed out from among the reeds and scampered off, silvery-blue in the moonlight. There was not another living creature in sight.

Then I turned back towards the village. As I rode along the edge of the ravine I remembered there had been some talk of Djenshenkul, who used to live in the village. People said he was a deserter, there were two others with him, men like himself from Yellow Valley, and that they were hiding in the mountains. I did not put much stock in these rumours. I could not understand how one could run for cover when so much was at stake. Some had to go off to war and die, it seemed, while others could sit it out behind their backs. No, I had thought, you won't find a person to take such shame upon himself. But now I suddenly began to have my doubts. We villagers knew each other like the hand before our face. There did not seem to be anyone who would become a horse-thief. And a horse is not a needle to be tucked away under your collar. To say nothing of three horses. That could only mean the thieves had come from somewhere else. They would be racing about the steppe and mountains like wolves. If Djenshenkul was truly a fugitive, this was his doing, I thought. However, I could not be sure: after all, you're not a thief till you're caught, and no one had seen him.

Three horses were a plough team. We somehow managed to make up a scratch team, we broke in four colts and harnessed them to the plough. It broke our hearts to do it, but we had no choice. Then it was time for sowing and we had no time to think of broken hearts, let alone the thieves. I think that was the hardest spring of my life. It was not the people, the people were not to blame. The people wanted to work, they were doing their best, but no one can work well on an empty stomach. It would take us a week to do what we used to accomplish in a day. We were behind in our work, and the sowing was not going according to plan. Then another misfortune fell upon us, there was not enough seed grain. We scoured every nook and cranny and somehow our team managed to fulfil its quota.

I had been doing a lot of thinking about our life then. We were not receiving anything for our work-days and had used up all our stores. What were we to do? Leave the farm and roam the land? No, then we would be lost forever. But what was to be done? Even if we held out till autumn and scratched through the winter it would be spring once more, and we'd have to make weak, hungry people work again. We could not get along without working.

I weighed the problem from all sides during my sleepless nights and finally hit upon an idea: what if we ploughed up the fallow land? We had a small field lying fallow not far away and could divide the harvest among the families. I talked it over with the chairman, then went to the district. I told them we had fulfilled our quota and this would be above-plan work, we'd do it without outside help, just for ourselves, as pay for our work-days and as a means of support for the people. Someone sitting at the table said:

"You'll be going against Stalin's collective farm law!" I could not help blurting out:

"Well then, let the law go to blazes! If we go hungry, who'll feed you?"

"Do you know where such words can get you?"

"Yes, I do. And you can send me right off, if that'll help matters. But first you must think about t who'll sow grain for the soldiers' bread."

Everyone began talking at once. In the end we took it up with the District Party Committee. They finally agreed, saying I would be held personally responsible. But it was not a matter of responsibility, it was a matter of seeds. There were none at all on the farm, everything had been planted. I thought it over and called my team together, from the youngest to the eldest. It was really more of a family council than a meeting.

"Let's decide what to do," I said. "We can't count on the crops in the fields. You all know that that's for the army, and if anything's left it'll go for seed grain. But if we can find some other seeds we can sow a field to aid the mothers of large families, the old people and the orphans. If you trust me, I'll undertake to see it through. I'm asking you to give up the very last precious grains that you have left in the bottom of your sacks and corn bins. Don't be angry. I know we can manage somehow on milk till harvest time even though we take the last food from our mouths and go hungry. But each grain will be returned a hundredfold. My dear friends, tighten your belts, clench your fists and agree to this great sacrifice. It's for your own good, for the good of your children. You won't regret it. Believe me, take my word as a mother. Help me while there's still time to sow."

Everyone seemed to agree at the meeting. Yet when it came to giving up the grain it was a difficult business, it was truly terrible. It was unbearable to see the mothers of large families run out of their houses, cursing every thing on earth: the war, their lives, their children, the farm and me. And yet the people tore a bleeding piece from their hearts and they gave, each as much as he could: some gave as much as eighteen pounds, others just a handful. I knew only too well that they were giving me their very last, yet I took it from them. I collected the grain and put it in sacks, a handful at a time. I canvassed the houses with a cart, pleading, cajoling, arguing, snatching the grain from their very hands. My only consolation was that in the autumn the people would thank me, that in the autumn each handful would return as a sackful.

I shall never forget how I treated my neighbour Aisha, a very sick woman. She was widowed young, her husband Djamanbai died before the war, leaving her alone, a frail woman with her only son Bektash. When she was well enough she would work on the farm or in her garden. She had a cow and that helped her pull through and bring up her son. By then Bektash was carrying his share of the load, he was a reliable boy. It was his cart we were using that day as we stopped at the houses. When we reached his house I said:

"Bektash, do you have any stores left?"

"Yes there's little left." He was silent for a moment and then added: "In the sack behind the oven."

"Go and bring it then," I said.

"No, Auntie Tolgonai. I wish you'd go yourself." Aisha was not well at the time. She was sitting on a rug with a warm shawl around her waist.

"Aisha, I've come to get what everyone is giving," I said.

"Everything we have is in there," she said, pointing to the sack behind the oven.

"Well, as much as you have. It's not for the fun of it. It's for seed grain. The field is ready, it's waiting to be sown. Don't hold us up, Aisha," I urged.

She bit her lip and looked at the door. Oh, accursed want, what it does to people!

"Aisha, be reasonable. It would only last you ten or fifteen days. Think of next winter, of next spring. I'm asking for your son's sake, Aisha. He's waiting outside with the cart."

She raised her eyes and looked at me beseechingly. "If there was anything to give do you think I'd hold back? You know me, Tolgonai. I'm your neighbour, after all."

I felt I was going to give in to her pleading but made myself cast aside all pity.

"I'm not here as your neighbour. I'm here as your team-leader!" I said, cutting her short. "I'm taking this grain in the name of the people!" With these words I walked over to the oven and picked up the sack.

Aisha turned away.

There were about fifteen pounds of wheat. I wanted to take it all, but did not dare. And so I poured half of it into an empty pail.

"Look, Aisha, I'm only taking half. Don't be angry," I said.

She turned around. There were tears streaming down her face. I felt miserable and dashed out of the house. Oh, why didn't I put the sack back? But how was I to know what would happen to the grain I collected?

In all, there were two big sacks. We sifted the grain and picked out the weeds, kernel by kernel. I myself took the sacks to the field. I should have waited another day - we still had to plough up the edge of the field. But I was impatient to sow the grain. At dawn we were to start sowing by hand. All was in readiness: the seeds and the field, and everything was turning out as I had planned.

That evening, when I returned home from work, I felt ill at ease. During the day I had told Bektash and another lad to take the harrows to the field in their cart. But boys will be boys, no matter how you look at it. I could not be certain that they had carried out my order so I said to Aliman:

"I'll go over to where the boys are. I want to see what they're up to."

I saddled my horse and rode off.

At the edge of the village I set off at a gallop, for it was twilight and getting dark. When I rode up to the field I noticed that the oxen were just standing there, still harnessed to their yoke. There was not a soul to be seen. I was angry at the ploughman, though he was only a boy, for not having unharnessed the poor beasts till now. "Wait till I catch you," I thought. "You'll be sorry, my lad." Setting out to look for him, I suddenly spied the overturned cart with the harrows. There was no one near it, either.

"Hey, boys! Where are you? Answer me!" I called.

There was not a sound, not a soul anywhere. What was wrong with them? Where had they all gone? I became frightened. I rode up to the tent and jumped down. By the light of a match I discovered the boys lying on the ground inside, bound hand and foot, gagged, badly beaten and bleeding. I yanked the rag from Bektash's mouth and cried in a voice that was not my own:

"The seeds! Where are the seeds?"

"They took them! They beat us!" he gasped and jerked his head towards where the thieves had vanished.

I can't recall what happened after that. I had never raced a horse as I did that night, not noticing it was night, not caring if it was the blackness of the grave. I would never have said a word if my house had been burned down and looted. If ten sacks of grain had been stolen from the threshing-shed in autumn I would have got over it, for mice also steal our grain. But I could have strangled the culprits with my bare hands for taking these seeds, our future bread.

I was hot on the heels of the thieves and soon caught sight of them and of the sparks flying from their horses' hoofs. The thieves had the sacks up in front on their saddles. They were heading towards the mountains.

As soon as I saw them I began to shout, to plead:

"Leave us the sacks, it's seed grain! Leave them, it's seed grain! It's seed grain!"

But they did not even turn around. I was getting close to them. Then I saw that the one on the outside was riding a pacer. I recognised it immediately. How could I have failed to know our own grey pacer? I recognised his gait and the white socks on his hind legs. And then I shouted:

"Stop! I know who you are! You're Djenshenkul! You're Djenshenkul! You won't get away from me now! Stop!"

Yes, it really was Djenshenkul. He veered away from the others and turned towards me. There was a burst of flame in the darkness and a loud blast. As I tumbled from the saddle I realised it was a shot. For an instant I had thought my horse had stumbled.

When I came to I felt a dull ache in my back. Blood oozed from my head, trickling down the back of my neck and forming a cold puddle. My horse was gasping and choking in its death agony. It was still kicking, trying to get up. I heard a death-rattle, its head hit the ground with a thud, and the animal lay still. Everything became still, all life seemed to have stopped. I lay there without moving, not even trying to raise myself. I didn't care about anything now. Life held no meaning for me. My only thought was how to kill myself. If there had been a precipice near by I would have crawled to the edge and threw myself over. I could not imagine how I would be able to look anyone in the face again. And then I saw the Way of the Reaper in the sky. The dull, misty river of the Milky Way reminded me of the dull tears that had flowed down Aisha's cheeks. I got to my knees, then to my feet, swayed and fell sobbing from grief and pain, I began to shout curses into the night:

"May the blood of war curse you, Djenshenkul! May the dead ones curse you, Djenshenkul! May all the children curse you, Djenshenkul!"

I sobbed and shouted until I had no strength left. A long time passed. Then I heard steps. Someone called out:

"Auntie Tolgonai! Where are you? Auntie Tolgonai!" I recognised Bektash's voice and called to him. Bektash was out of breath when he came running. He fell to his knees and raised my head.

"Auntie Tolgonai, what's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm just bruised," I said, reassuring him. "The bullet killed my horse."

"Well, it could have been worse. Let me help you up," he said in a more cheerful voice. Then he added: "The meat will come in handy. We'll divide it up among the people. "

The boys took me home in their cart. I was bedridden for three days with the pain in my back. It still aches now when the weather is bad. Many people dropped in to visit and see how I was getting along. I am grateful to them for calling, but I am still more grateful to them for never having reproached me, for not saying anything, as if nothing had happened. Perhaps they guessed how I felt about it. Whenever I recalled that all our labour had been in vain, that the field was not sown and the grain I had snatched from the mouths of wailing children had become the prey of those accursed bandits, a searing pain would tear through me and the light would dim before my eyes.

"Not only you, Tolgonai, but I, the Earth, also felt this pain. That barren field was a throbbing wound all summer. The pain lasted very long. One can do me no greater harm than leave my fields barren, Tolgonai. How many fields were laid barren by the war! My greatest enemies are those who start wars."

"You are right, Mother-Earth. Was that not what my son Maselbek wrote? Earth, do you remember Maselbek's letter?"

"I do, Tolgonai."

"Yes, we both do. Today is the day of commemoration, Mother-Earth. Today we shall remember everything as it happened."

"We shall, Tolgonai. For Maselbek was not only your son, he was my son as well, a son of the soil. Tell me about his letter again, Tolgonai."

When the people dropped in to visit me I thought they tried not to mention what had happened out of pity and spoke instead about the latest news, their work and the weather; but there was another reason. Later, I guessed what it was. But they all knew what awaited me.

Aisha came to see me and brought a cup of cream. I felt bitterly ashamed when I saw her. I did not know what to say and sat there in my bed in silence. She was the first to speak.

"Tolgonai, try not to think about what happened. And forgive me for my weakness. I'm not angry at you. If need be, I'd gladly give my life for you. My Bektash is big enough to be a help to both of us now. You know, Tolgonai, he even loves you more than he loves me. I'm glad of it. That means he'll grow up to be a wise man."

"Thank you for your kind words, Aisha," I murmured. The next morning I felt better and I went outside to have a look at the yard. But my strength quickly failed me. I went over and sat down near the window in the sunshine. Aliman was washing clothes in the yard. I told her to go to work, but she said the chairman had told her to stay home for a few days to look after me.

That spring the big old apple-tree that Suvankul had planted blossomed so profusely it seemed as if it had gathered new strength and become young again. When the orchards are in blossom the air is so pure that great distances seem near. I sat there admiring everything about me and at length noticed our postman, old Temirchal, approaching. He asked how I was, but he seemed strangely in a hurry and uncomfortable, he kept coughing badly and complaining of his cough, saying he had caught a chill the week before and that the cough was wearing him out. Then, as if in passing, he added:

"I think I have a letter here for you." And he pulled it from his bag.



I was hurt by his indifference.

"Why didn't you say so right away? Who is it from?"

"I think it's from Maselbek," he mumbled.

In my joy I did not immediately notice that it wasn't the usual kind of soldier's triangular envelope, but a stiff white one with typewritten words on it. Our neighbour Bektursun, a wounded veteran, hobbled over on his crutches. I decided his bad leg was worse, for he barely managed it. He would come over to our house sometimes to sit and talk. Bektursun greeted us and took the envelope. He said it was from Maselbek.

"Why are your hands shaking? Don't stand there on your crutches, sit down and read it to me," I said.

He had difficulty in sitting down, for he couldn't bend his leg. Bektursun opened the envelope with trembling fingers and began to read. Oh, my sweet son, I understood every thing from the very first words.

"Dearest Mother," he wrote, "time will pass and some day you will understand me, you will be convinced that what I did was right. Yes, I know you will say that your son acted honestly. And yet, even though you understand, somewhere deep in your heart the words you did not say to me will remain: 'My son, how could you have left this bright world so easily? Why did I give birth to you, why did I bring you up?' Yes, Mother, you are a mother and you have the right to demand an answer, but history will some day answer your questions. Now I can only say that we did not ask for this war and we did not start it. This is a terrible calamity for all of us, for all people. And we must shed our blood and give up our lives to crush and destroy this monster. If we do not, we will not be worthy of the name of Man. I never dreamed of being a military hero. I was studying for a very modest profession, I wanted to be a teacher. Oh, how I wanted to be a teacher! But instead of chalk and a pointer I had to take up a gun and become a soldier. I am not to blame for this. It is the time we live in. I did not have a chance to give the children even a single lesson.

"In an hour from now I shall leave on a mission for my country. I do not think I will return alive. I am going out there to save the lives of many of my comrades in the coming offensive. I am going out there for my people, for victory, for all that is beautiful in man.

"This is my last letter, these are my last words. Dear Mother! Yes, I shall repeat your name, Mother, for the grief I am bringing you. But I want you to understand that this is not a reckless sacrifice. No. This is how Life itself has taught me to live. And this is my first and last lesson for the children I was to have taught. I am going of my own free will and conviction. I am proud to carry out my greatest duty to my fellow-men.

"Don't cry, Mother. I do not want anyone to cry. In such cases no one should cry.

"Forgive me, Mother, and farewell.

"Farewell, my Ala-Tau Mountains. How I loved you!

"Your son, Lieutenant Maselbek Suvankulov, teacher.

*Written at the front at midnight on March 9, 1943."*

I raised my leaden head as in a dream. There was a silent crowd of people in the yard. No one wept. Maselbek had asked us not to cry. The women raised me up. As I stood up a gust of wind tore at the apple-tree, sending a shower of white petals to the ground. They fell silently on our heads. The great pure sky shone blue beyond our white apple-tree, beyond the white peaks of the far mountains. A terrible cry welled up within me. I wanted to cry out for the whole world to hear. But I was silent. I would carry out my son's last wish, he had asked me not to cry. I do not know what Aliman was doing. I saw her coming towards me slowly with arms outstretched. She came very close, looked into my eyes, then turned around and walked away, her hands covering her face.

That is how I lost my middle son. All that remained to me of him was his hat.

12

"But I have his name, Tolgonai. I am his motherland. The people have his words, Tolgonai. They are his countrymen. "

"Yes, Mother-Earth. That is true. Our collective farm bears his name now. Maselbek's comrades sent a letter to the village Soviet together with his last letter. They wrote that they would never forget their comrade, that they would forever take pride in his heroic action and that our country would always preserve his memory. They wrote that on the eve of a great offensive Maselbek blew up an enemy munitions dump. The blast destroyed everything for miles around. I bow my head in honour of the heroes and my son Maselbek, whose glory I am proud of. But nothing, no glory in the world, can take his place. Ask any mother, no mother dreams of such glory. Mothers bring their children into the world to live, to rejoice in the happiness that is life."

"You are right, Tolgonai. I shall never forget the spring of victory, I shall always remember the day the people welcomed home their soldiers returning from war. But to this very day, Tolgonai, I cannot say whether there was more happiness or grief."

13

That day it was our turn to use the farm plough to plough our garden. We were just finishing our work when there was a great commotion in the street. Aliman ran off to see what it was all about. She returned in a flash.

"Mother, hurry!" she urged. "The people are going to meet the soldiers!"

We left the plough and the harnessed oxen in the middle of the field. True enough, the entire village, on horseback and on foot, bent old men and old women, children and wounded veterans on crutches, were all coming in the same direction. People passed the news on to each other even as they hurried along. Someone passing through (they said he was from Zarechye) had told someone that the soldiers were returning home, that two troop trains had pulled into the station, that the boys from all the villages were there, and that they were already on their way and should be here in an hour or so. No one asked whether this was true or not. The people wanted it to be true, they had dreamt of this long-awaited day, and so no one had any doubts.

We ran to the edge of the village, to the place where a new street had been started just before the war. The riders did not dismount, those on foot climbed a hillock near the irrigation ditch, boys perched on the ruins of the unfinished walls and some climbed near-by trees. And everyone waited and gazed at the road. Some, interrupting each other in their haste, were speaking of the happy dreams they had had the night before; others gathered handfuls of small pebbles and began to tell the future with them. In the dreams and fortune-telling, and in the other premonitions and omens the people saw only good signs, the fulfillment of all their hopes. I remember this and think that if people the world over always waited for and loved their sons, brothers, fathers and husbands as we waited for and loved them, perhaps there would never be another war on earth.

When at times the talk in the crowd died down, the people would be lost in their own thoughts, their heads bowed. They were waiting for fate to make itself known. Each one asked himself: Who will return, who will not? Who will be rewarded for waiting and who will not? Life and the future depended on the answers.

It was at such a moment that one of the boys suddenly shouted from a tree-top: "They're coming!" And everyone froze, as taut as the strings of a *komuz*. Then they all repeated in one voice: "They're coming!" Once again they were silent in expectation, once again everything was still. So very still. But then, as if coming to with a start, they began to shout: "Where? Where are they?" And then they were quiet again. A cart came into view on the high road. It was clattering along and stopped at the fork in the road, where the dirt road leads off to our village. A soldier jumped down. He picked up his greatcoat and kit-hag, said good-bye to the driver and headed in our direction.

No one in the crowd said a word, everyone gazed in silence and wonder at the road along which a solitary soldier with a greatcoat and kit-bag slung over his shoulder was advancing. He was getting closer, but still no one moved. There was bewilderment in every face. We were waiting for a miracle. We did not believe our eyes, for we were waiting for many, not one.

The soldier was getting closer and closer. Then he stopped uncertainly, for he, too, was shocked at the sight of the silent crowd at the edge of the village. He was probably thinking: Who are these people?

Why are they silent? Why are they standing there? Are they waiting for someone? The soldier looked back up the road several times but there was not a soul on it except himself. He headed towards us again, and stopped again, and looked back again. A barefoot girl standing in front of the crowd suddenly shouted:

"It's my brother! Ashiraly! Ashiraly!" and tearing the kerchief from her head she raced headlong towards him.

God knows how she recognised him, but her shout was like a shot that brought us to our senses. The smallest boys and then the girls ran after her.

"It's Ashiraly! It's him!" others shouted and then everyone, young and old alike, rushed towards the soldier.

A great force picked us up and carried us on its wings. As we ran towards the soldier with open arms we carried to him our lives; all that we had lived through and suffered, the torture of endless waiting, our sleepless nights, our heads turned grey, our young girls grown old, our widows and orphans, our tears and moaning, and our courage – all this we carried to the victorious soldier. And suddenly realising that we had come to welcome him, he broke into a run.

As we were running together in a crowd I suddenly fancied I saw a troop train thundering by; the wind tore at my face and I heard a cry: "Mama-a-a! Alima-a-an!" and the clattering wheels thundered in my ears.

The riders were the first to reach the soldier, they swooped up his greatcoat and kit-bag and grabbed both his hands in theirs.

Oh, Victory! We had been waiting for you so long! Hail, Victory! Forgive us our tears! Forgive my daughter-in-law Aliman for beating her head against Ashiraly's chest and demanding of him as she shook him by the shoulders: "Where is he? Where is my Kasym?" Forgive us all, Victory. We sacrificed so much for you. Forgive us our cries: Where are the others? Where's my son? Where's my boy? Where are all the others? When will they come home?" And forgive the soldier Ashiraly for saying: They'll come back, my friends, they'll all come home. They'll be home soon. Tomorrow." Forgive us, Victory, forgive us. As I embraced and kissed Ashiraly I thought of Djainak, of Maselbek, of Kasym, of Suvankul: none of them would ever return. Forgive me, Victory.

We walked along in silence. Now and then Aliman would sob deeply and painfully and sigh as if she were suffocating. Her face was misery, eyes on the ground, head bowed, she was lost in her own thoughts. I could very well guess the thoughts that had overcome her. Aliman was in despair. I could tell by her face, by her misty eyes, by the way she was biting her lip. I knew what she was thinking and to myself I said to her: "Well dearest daughter-in-law, the time has surely come for us to part. Now you have finally buried Kasym for good. What else can you do? You cannot follow the dead to the grave, you cannot

remain a widow all your life. It's all over now. And you'll leave. Nothing can be done about it, you'll leave for certain. I don't hold it against you. You're not going because you want to, it's not some sudden fancy. It's fate. Ah, Fate. If you only knew Aliman, how hard it is to say good-bye to you. We were just like a mother and daughter to each other. When you leave I'll bless you as I would my daughter and pray for your happiness. You have your life ahead of you, you are young and pretty, and you will find someone. The main thing is to find a decent man. Will he take Kasym's place in your heart? Who knows? I cannot help you in any way. My only request is that when you are gone you think of me now and then. I have no one left but you. I'll be all alone in the house now. All alone in the whole wide world. It's terrifying to even think of it. And there is to be no consolation in my old age: you had no time to give me a grandchild. Perhaps it is better for you this way. But don't pay attention to me. After all, why should you waste your youth because of an old woman like me? I've lived my life. Yours is still ahead of you. Just tell me whenever you decide to go. You are free to leave at any time. I want you to leave with a clear conscience. I shall always remember you, love you and be grateful to you."

I walked along, thinking these thoughts, mustering up the courage to put them into words. Aliman knew what I was thinking. When people are very close they understand each other at a glance. And yet, I did not expect her to say what she did.

We were passing the abandoned street. As ill luck would have it, I glanced at Aliman and Kasym's former plot. Now, as five years before, there was a huge grey pile of rocks in the yard, but the bricks had long since turned to rubble. The half-finished street had been abandoned at the outbreak of war. Each summer brought a new crop of weeds. The walls had sunk and had collapsed in some places, there were nettles inside the houses, poking out from the yawning holes of the windows. Far into the autumn calves tethered to their stakes would graze here, while hoopoes called out forlornly. The crested birds sought the deserted silence of the graveyard. They sat there on the ruins as on tombstones, basking in the soft warmth of spring and calling to each other in muted, mournful voices.

Gazing at the emptiness, I said to myself: "What happened to the people who wanted to live here, to build fires in their own hearths? My poor Kasym was not fated to build his first house here either!" My soul was empty and sad. Aliman took my hand and smiled gently.

"Mother," she said, "why are you so depressed? Have you lost all faith in life? Don't, Mother. I know how hard it is. But you're strong. You're ... " She hesitated, as if wanting to add something. Then, changing her mind, she smiled guiltily. "You're so good. Come, let's sit down here on this hillock and have a talk."

"Now she'll say she's leaving," I thought. A hot wave of pity for myself and for her enveloped me and I replied, trying to still my shaking voice:

"All right. Let's sit down and talk. "

We stopped at a mound by the edge of the road. There we sat, just the two of us, a mother and her daughter-in-law, deciding our future and how we were to live.

Aliman looked down and sighed. Then she said:

"Well, Mother, the cruel war has ended. You've probably been wondering what we are to do from now on." She fell silent. I, too, was silent. Aliman raised her eyes and looked at me frankly and seriously. "Don't be sad, Mother," she said with a wan smile. "Do you think there's no happiness left to us, not even the tiniest bit? I won't believe that of four men not a single one will return. No, wait, Mother, don't interrupt me. Listen to what I have to say. It's not for me to console you. But I would never deceive myself. Believe me, Mother, my heart tells me that Djainak will come back. Missing in action means that he's alive. After all, no one saw him die. Maybe he was captured, or was fighting in the forests with the partisans and now he'll suddenly come back. Or maybe he's been badly wounded and hasn't been able to write. Anything could have happened. You'll see, he'll come back one fine day, right out of the blue. Let's wait, Mother, let's not bury him so soon. There have been cases, you know about them yourself, when men who had been officially declared dead, and not merely missing in action, have come back hale and hearty. Why, in the next village, and somewhere else, among the Kazakhs of Yellow Valley, they even had the funeral feasts, and then the dead turned out to be alive and came back, I have a feeling, I'm convinced our Djainak is alive and will come home soon. It's just not possible that of four men not a single one will return. Let's wait a while, Mother, we've waited so long, let's wait a little while longer. Don't worry about me. If I've been your daughter-in-law up till now, I'll be like a son to you and take the place of all your sons from now on."

Aliman was silent. We sat in silence for a long time. It was the middle of May. Far, far away white puffs of clouds were gathering into a rain-cloud that seemed to be filling with black smoke. There were peals of thunder. The cool scent of rain reached us. Then a light shower on the far horizon changed to streaming torrents, sparkling in the sun and taking immense invisible steps across the earth: now it would vanish in the mountains, now it would come down to the valley, now it would rise up into the mountains again, now it would come down to the steppe once more. I gazed transfixed at the horizon. My hot face was cooled by the distant rain-drenched wind. I said nothing to Aliman. All my words for her were there: as generous and as bright as that far-off sparkling shower.

Yes, there would be showers and the wheat would ripen, the people would go on living and I would live on with them. It was not because Aliman had been sorry for me that I felt so, not because out of the kindness of her heart she had said she would not leave me. No, I rejoiced at something quite different. Who said that war makes people cruel, base, greedy and empty? No, War, you may trample people with your boots for forty years, kill, plunder, burn and destroy, but never will you succeed in breaking a human being, in humiliating him, in conquering him.

And my Aliman was a human being. Why did she encourage her own belief that Djainak, who had parachuted one dark night into enemy territory and had disappeared that very same night, was certainly alive and would certainly come home? Why did she keep telling herself that the world is not really as

unjust as we believe it is? I did not dare to destroy this faith, I did not dare to confuse her hopes. I even believed her. What if Djainak really was alive? It would not be a miracle then if he returned one fine day. I believed like a child. It was what I wanted. I was even beginning to see the day in my mind's eye, when Aliman interrupted our silence. She was the first to remind me we had not finished ploughing the garden.

"Mother, the plough's just lying there. Hurry! The earth'll get dry," she said.

We ran towards the garden. The oxen had long since dragged the plough to the grass where they were now grazing. Aliman drove them back, we set the ploughshare in the furrow again and continued ploughing. Is it not strange, how little a person needs. Sometimes a single kind word is enough to revive him from the dead. This was true of Aliman. Or had I just imagined it? Suddenly she seemed to turn into the Aliman of old, of the days before the war. Everything about her brightened, her every word, every smile and movement, everything was as it once had been. She tossed her short jacket onto the ground, tucked in her dress, rolled up her sleeves, pushed her kerchief back on her head and skillfully took up the reins.

"Hey, White-Head, come on! Hey, Short-Tail, come on!" she shouted, cracking the long whip sharply.

Aliman wanted me to cheer up, to work, to live. That is why she behaved as she did that memorable day. She would turn back as she worked and say to me with a smile:

"Mother don't lean on the handles so, you'll raise up the rocks. Save your strength!"

When we had two or three more turns to do it started to rain. It was a noisy, merry shower. At first the rain sprinkled the oxen's backs with scattered drops, then it paused and came down in dancing streams, playing and clapping, drenching the entire village in an instant. The hens clucked and spread their wings as they ran along with their chicks. The women tore the drying clothes from the lines and ran indoors. The children and the dogs all rushed out into the street. They chased about in the pouring rain and chanted:

*Rain, rain, go away,  
Come again another day.*

"We'll get wet! Run!" I said to Aliman.

But she shook her head.

"Don't worry, Mother, we won't melt!" She laughed like a little girl tickled by the rain and drove the team on faster.

Her merriment was catching. I took joy in watching her and whispered to myself: "My bright one, my rain girl! How happy you could have been! Oh, life, life ..." Now I know she was doing all this for me. She wanted me to forget about the war so badly, to forget about my grief, to look out upon life with confidence. Aliman held up her hands and face to the rain and said:

"Look at the rain, Mother! See how clean it is! This will be a good year for the crops! Come on, rain! Come on down in buckets!" And she cracked the whip at the rain and the oxen's steaming backs.

She laughed and did not know how beautiful she was in her soaked dress, so slim, with firm breasts and round hips, with shining eyes and flushed cheeks. May you be thrice cursed, war!

When the shower stopped and went off to play somewhere else, Aliman fell silent. She watched the rain move off regretfully, listening to it die down beyond the river, thinking, perhaps, that rain is not eternal, either, and that it, too, passes quickly. She gave a deep sigh. I do not know whether she was thinking of Kasym then, or of something else, but looking up at me she smiled again.

"Now we can plant the corn while the soil is damp!" she said and ran off home.

Aliman brought back a small pail of soaked corn.

She took a handful of the large, swollen kernels. "Mother," she said, "may Djainak return before the corn ripens!" With these words she tossed the first handful into the soil.

I shall never forget that day. The clean, rain drenched sun peeped out from behind the clouds like a newborn babe. Aliman walked barefoot down the dark moist furrow, tossing a handful of kernels at every other step. These were not simple seeds she was planting, she was planting seeds of hope, of good, of expectation.

"You'll see, Mother," she said as she sowed. "My words will come true. I'll bake corn-cobs in hot ashes for Djainak myself. Remember how he used to fight with me for the cobs! Once he pulled a hot cob from the coals, stuck it in under his shirt and ran away from me. But it scorched his stomach and he began to hop about and dance as if he'd been stung. He poured a whole pail of water on his chest. Instead of helping him, all I did was laugh my head off and shout: 'Serves you right! Serves you right' Do you remember that time, Mother?" she said, smiling at the memory of it.

I am thankful to her for that also.

"Yes, Tolgonai, you waited a long time for Djainak."



"We did, Mother-Earth. The corn ripened not once, but twice and three times, but our Djainak never came back. And there was never any word of him. Remember how many times I came to you with my tears, sharing my sorrow with you?"

"Yes, Tolgonai. Many were the times. You wept and asked me what to do about your daughter-in-law, how to keep her from ruining her young life. But there was no way I could help you. So many years have passed since then, but still I cannot say anything."

15

Life went on, things at the collective farm began to improve, life became a little easier. The people's memories of the war began to fade, its traces began to disappear from their souls.

Aliman and I kept on working on the farm. As soon as the soldiers returned I handed over my job to them.

"I've been working as a team-leader for three years, and I've had my share of worries. Now that you're back you can take over the reins," I said to them. "You can give me a rest. I've grown old in these years, but I'll help you out anyway."

The young people of those days still call me "*Apa* - team-leader", which shows they still respect me.

Though life had gone back to normal, Aliman and I could find no peace. No one noticed, but in our hearts we suffered constantly, our thoughts kept revolving about the same thing. At first glance it would seem that nothing could be simpler than for us to have a heart-to-heart talk: to accept the situation and agree that each should go her own way, that each should manage her own life. Yes, it really would seem simplicity itself. If I had had someone else for a daughter-in-law and not Aliman, or if she had not been so good to me, I would never have thought twice of telling her frankly that there was no use letting the years slip by, that she should find herself a husband and leave before it was too late. But I could not bring myself to say these words to her, to Aliman, for no matter how you soften the words, or how carefully you choose them, the meaning is still the same, it is coarse and cruel. I had no right to chase her away against her wishes. Once her relatives from Kaindy called in on their way somewhere. I wanted my conscience to be clear and I forced myself to tell them that as far as I was concerned Aliman was free, and I would give her my blessings. But Aliman cut us short so rudely I was embarrassed for both of us. She would not let us discuss it at all. She said she had a head of her own and whether or not she left was her own business and they were not to meddle in her affairs. I regretted having been in such a rush to say what I did and was ashamed to look at her. But she, my wise darling, understood everything and said not a word, as if nothing had happened. And that is how we lived, feeling sorry for each other, deceiving ourselves in our hope for Djainak's return; then this hope, too, faded, yet time went on and then it was too late.

I do not know how it all came about. Our village lies along the cattle road. From time immemorial shepherds have driven their herds along this road: in spring to the mountains and in autumn down to

the steppe again. At times the drivers call in at our village for a few days to give both their flocks and themselves a rest.

In the autumn of 'forty-six a young shepherd from a neighbouring village drove his flock across the dry valley to the meadow-lands. You could see he had been a soldier, he still wore his grey greatcoat, rode a good horse with a rifle over his shoulder and had a sheepskin coat tied to his saddle. He often galloped through the village. I never paid much attention to him, and as far as I was concerned he could have galloped by as much as he liked, there were so many people riding back and forth, I didn't even know him.

There were several weddings in the village that autumn. Someone had arranged a goat hunt on horseback in honor of his son's wedding. This shepherd turned out to be a skilled rider. Aliman and I were getting ready to go to the wedding. While she was dressing a horse thundered down the street and there was a loud thud at our gate. I ran out to see what had happened. It was the shepherd. His horse was dancing and rearing under him; he cut a fine figure in the saddle with his whip in his teeth and the sleeves of his tunic rolled up. The goat's carcass lay on the ground at our gate. The winner of the hunt can toss it into any yard he wishes. I became so flustered I didn't know what to say.

"What's on your mind, son?" the words were out of my mouth before I knew it.

"Anyone home?" he asked.

"Whom are you looking for?"

Then he mumbled that it was all a mistake, grabbed the goat up from the ground, turned his horse and trotted off. Just then the pursuers came into view. When they saw him ride off with the goat they galloped after him. That was all there was to it. I did not see him after that. At the time I felt put out, for custom has it that if the goat is dropped at a house, it belongs to the people of the house. Had he really dropped it by mistake? Then why was it lying right under the gate, not out in the street? What could it mean?

When Aliman came out of the house everything became clear. She had on a flowered shawl and a silk dress. She looked at me quickly and lowered her head in shame.

"Let's go, Mother," she said softly.

It was only too clear why the shepherd had come to our house. I recalled that for several days past Aliman had gone to the river for water of an evening, though there was plenty of water in the ditch outside our yard, and that she had returned late each time. There was a dull ache in my heart. No, not because I was jealous though perhaps I really was - it was something else. I myself had prayed that Aliman would not remain forever a widow, that she would find herself a husband soon, and I wished for this with all my heart, but now, suddenly, I was afraid. I became as worried as if it was my own daughter,

not my daughter-in-law, I had to marry off. I was fearful lest she be making a mistake, and worried about how she would find life in a new household, and what her in-laws would be like, and what her husband would be like. These thoughts never once left me all through the wedding, and on the way home again.

"Aliman, do you really know him? What sort of a person is he? Don't rush into it, my little daughter Aliman. Don't make a blunder. You should get to know him better," I pleaded with her to myself, I hoped I would not be a barrier in the young people's way. How could I make Aliman stop feeling shy in my presence? How could I gently let her know she was free to do as she thought best? I tried to hide my fears and speak to her as always. I even laughed and joked so that she would not become suspicious or, God forbid, think that I disapproved. But she knew all about my fears and worries.

That evening, when Aliman picked up the pail and went for water I heaved a sigh of relief, as if a load had fallen from my shoulders. Now she will have a chance to see him, I thought. But she returned very quickly. She had not gone to the river, she had brought the water from the ditch.

"Mother," she said, setting down the pail, "I'll warm some water and you can wash your hair."

"There's no hurry, dear," I said. "Tomorrow's another day. If you have to go anywhere ... "

But she interrupted me.

"I have to go to work tomorrow and won't have time. You wash your hair, Mother, and I'll comb it for you."

Aliman warmed a pot of water and began fussing with me as she would with a little girl who didn't know how to wash her own hair. First she made me wash my hair with sour milk, then with soap, then rinse it and soap it again. She hovered over me, changing the water, adding cold to hot and pouring dipperfuls over my head. At any other time I would have lost my patience and told her to leave me alone, but I could not do it that evening. I felt guilty because I thought I had been the reason for her not going to her rendezvous. "What a shame! Why didn't she go?" I wondered, vexed at both of us. However, Aliman seemed very pleased. As she combed my hair she remarked sadly:

"Mother, your braids were probably thick once, for you were also young."

She stroked my head gently and her fingers touched my face. I could not raise my tear-filled eyes. "She is saying good-bye," I thought forlornly. Then she braided my hair and got her treasured perfume from her trunk. Kasym had bought it for her and she was saving it.

"What's the matter with you, Aliman?" I protested.

"What do I need it for? People will laugh at me, an old woman wearing perfume!"

She did not even listen but laughed merrily. Aliman sprinkled perfume on my face, neck and head, using up all that was left in the bottle. Then she embraced me and began to inspect me from all sides.

"See how young and beautiful you are!" she said, happy at her own fancies.

I, too, was feeling more cheerful. After we had had our tea, Aliman said:

"Well, it's time for bed, Mother. I'll make your bed up."

That night neither of us slept. Aliman was troubled by her own thoughts, she kept sighing in her corner, tossing and turning. My heart was full of thoughts of her. First I would picture her running through the wheat to the combine with a bunch of wild hollyhocks. She dropped the flowers on the step of the combine and ran off mischievously. Then I would see her pulling Kasym from his horse again, grabbing tearfully at his hand like a little child. Next I recalled our trip to the station. We were riding along in the cart, Aliman beside me, her cheeks flaming in the cold, a light snow covering her. The snow had stuck to her shawl, to strands of her hair flying in the wind and to her collar, making her even more beautiful. Then I saw her rush towards me with outstretched arms, crying: "Mother! We're widows! Miserable widows!" I saw her racing across the red field of tulips in her black kerchief. I was recalling all that bound us and suddenly imagined her leaving with the shepherd, driving his flock along the valley. I could hear her saying:

"Forgive me, Mother, I'm leaving. Think kindly of me. Farewell, Mother!" I ran along the steep bank after her, waving and bidding her farewell: "Farewell, my sunshine! The light has gone out of my life. Farewell, Aliman! Be happy! Farewell!" "Hey, young fellow!" I shouted to the shepherd. "Treat her well, take good care of my daughter-in-law. If you don't, I'll put an awful curse on you!" Tears streamed down my face, soaking the pillow. I wept softly with the blanket pulled over my head so Aliman would not hear me.

When Aliman came home from work next day she did not go out, but stayed home all evening. After that the shepherd drove his flock off and did not come back. Aliman seemed upset and depressed.

"You, should have ignored me and gone off with him if you like him, I scolded her in my mind. Then I felt sorry for her. "My poor dear! Why were you born to so much suffering!" But the days slipped by and little by little all was forgotten.

Early next spring the shepherd came back. I recognised him when I saw him in the meadow where his sheep were grazing. Now once again Aliman began going off in the evenings, returning home late at night. I did not say anything. She had to decide her fate herself.

One night I waited up very late for Aliman to return. The village was asleep. I had turned down the lamp and got in to bed, but I could not sleep. I was restless and depressed. As I waited for her I listened to every rustle. It was a quiet spring night. The moon was out, clouds grazed it from time to time. I was

chilled from loneliness, not the cold. I wrapped my sheepskin coat about me and dozed off, propped up in bed. I woke with a start, frightened by something. Aliman stood in the doorway. The buttons were ripped off her dress, baring her chest, her hair was disheveled and her eyes were strange. It was the first time I had ever seen her drunk. She stepped over the threshold, swayed, caught hold of the stove to keep from falling and shook her head. A chill ran down my spine.

"What, are you looking at?" she asked, raising her head. "Wait, what are you looking at? Yes, I'm drunk. I've been drinking vodka. What else is there for me to do? Who should drink if not me? Well, say something!"

I was so numb I could not utter a word. It was terrifying to see what had happened to my daughter-in-law. Aliman just stood there, hanging on to the stove. She lowered her head and suddenly murmured:

"Mother, you don't know anything. I... Today I. . . Remember, when we saw Kasym off, we went down to the river. Over there ... " Instead of finishing she cried out, grabbed her head in both hands and fell sobbing to the floor.

Only then did I come to my senses. I rushed over to her, caught her up and pressed her to me.

"What's wrong, Aliman? Why are you crying? Tell me. What's bothering you? Did somebody hurt you? Tell me! Is it something I did? If so, tell me what it is."

"No, Mother dear!" she sobbed. "My poor, unhappy, lonely dear! You don't know anything. And even if you did, what could you do? Oh, Mother! Oh, Mother!"

She wept and moaned, her wet face buried in my breast. Finally her weeping subsided and she fell asleep. But even in her sleep she moaned and sobbed. I sat by her bed till dawn, wondering: How are we to go on? What are we to do? I decided to have it out with her. But the next morning she would not talk. She was feeling bad enough as it was. Silently, with her eyes alone, she begged me not to remind her of what had happened during the night. As we passed through the gate on our way to work she said softly:

"Forgive me, Mother."

And I did not want to worry her.

Three months passed. That summer we had an investigation. It was the case of Djenshenkul, the wartime deserter. He had not dared to come back to the village openly after the war, but had been visiting his horse stealthily at night. He had hidden out somewhere in Kazakhstan, making money selling stolen cattle. Now, finally, he had been caught. His past came to light and he was brought to our village to be identified by witnesses. A messenger from the village Soviet was sent to our house for me.

"You're being called as a witness," he said.

On the way there I met Aliman. She was coming home from work. She looked tired and dejected as she walked along, apart from the others. Her face had sallowed that summer. I felt sorry for her and did not want her to sit at home alone.

"Come, child," I said. "Let's go to the office. Then we'll come back together."

"No, Mother," she replied, "what will I do there? I'll go on home, my head aches."

"All right. Lie down and rest awhile. I'll milk the cow when I get back."

There was a covered car outside the village Soviet. A crowd of witnesses and onlookers on their way home from work had gathered on the porch. I hadn't seen Djenshenkul for quite a while, seven years it must have been. His evil life seemed to be agreeing with him. He was heavy-set and bull-faced. He sat on a bench near the window looking sullenly about and snapping back at someone:

"So I'm a thief, am I? But did your hands catch me, did your eyes see me? No? Well then, don't smear my good name. You can say what you like as much as you like, but it's nothing but words. You don't have any evidence! Evidence!"

At this I flung open the window and shouted from the street:

"You're lying, you scum! You say we need evidence - well, here I am! I'm evidence!"

"Won't you come in here, Mother," the investigator said, rising from his chair behind the table.

I came in and began talking the moment I entered. "Yes, you're right, we never caught you at it. But, we had no time to go chasing after you. We were ploughing the land with our bare hands, we were growing grain for the front then. We were gathering up the fallen ears to feed our children. But you drove off our horses, our draught horses. You snatched away the last seeds, gathered kernel by kernel, the grain we had taken from the children, and you stole it from us. That means you were our enemy. And when I caught up with you I shouted: 'Stop! I know you, Djenshenkul! Stop!' You turned around and shot at me. There's your evidence!"

Then the investigator said:

"Thank you, Mother. You are free to leave now. You can go home now."

As I was leaving, Djenshenkul's wife rushed to the door. She flew at me in a rage screaming:

"Oh, you old scarecrow! You keep looking for truth everywhere, but truth will punish you! And it serves you right! If it wasn't enough up till now, you'll soon have something else to wail about. Where'd your

daughter-in-law get her big belly from? The slut got herself in trouble right under your very nose and here you go around looking for truth. Why don't you both look for it now, you shameless bitches!"

People pulled her away into a far corner, they held their hands over her mouth, but I said:

"Let her go. Don't touch her." And I started home.

Either the dust was so hot in the road that day or shame burnt my feet, but at first I was nearly running. Then I slowed down and wandered along, trying to put my thoughts in order. Such a thing had never entered my head, yet I should have guessed. Aliman had changed of late, she had been keeping to herself, she hardly spoke at all and even kept away from her girl-friends. I thought it was all because nothing had come of her affair with the shepherd. He had left for the mountains that spring and that had been the last of him. I thought they had quarreled and she was taking it badly, but that was not it at all. Ah, what a misfortune! Who could ever have known that this was how things would turn out? I was at a loss. I could not imagine what to do. The next evening Aisha called me over for a cup of tea. As we chattered she said:

"Djenshenkul's wife moved out of the village last night."

I said nothing. What was that to me? She could move if she liked. Anyone was free to go wherever he wished. It was only two years later that I found out the villagers had come to her house in the night, loaded all her belongings on some carts and said to her: "Go wherever you want. There's no place for you in our village." After that not a soul ever said a word to me about our misfortune. Who knows, perhaps they may have spoken to Aliman, some might have pitied her, others may have scorned her, but no one ever said a word of it to me, and for this I am grateful to the people. So many years have passed since then, and I am respected by all as before.

Nothing changed in our relationship after I discovered that Aliman was pregnant. We worked and lived and sought each other's advice on various matters as before. Aliman never spoke of the child she was expecting. It was either that she could not bring herself to say anything or that she was biding her time. Nor did I say anything, sparing her pride. Most important was that in my heart I did not condemn her. I had no right to, for her entire life had passed before my eyes. I had seen everything. I had understood everything and I was also to blame. That is why I said to myself: If Aliman has sinned it is my sin too, if she bears a child, it will be my child, too, I shall take all the shame and the hardship and suffering upon myself. I knew that sooner or later the day would come when we would have to speak of it, then we would forgive each other our long silence. And still, we kept putting the conversation off from one day to the next, from the next to the one after that. But it had to come.

Towards the end of the summer, when Aliman was in her fifth or sixth month, I was leading our cow out to the herd early in the morning. That day the little shepherd boy was as lively as a young cockerel. The herd was soon abreast of our gate. As he drove it on, he gave me a broad smile.

"Auntie Tolgonai!" he said, "*Suiunchu!* - give me something for the good news I bring! Grandfather Djorobek's daughter-in-law's had a baby!"

"No? When?"

"At dawn this morning."

"A boy or a girl?"

"It's a girl, Auntie Tolgonai. They said they'd name her Skylark, because she was born at dawn like a skylark! "

"How nice. May she have a long life. Thank you for the good news. "

I was especially touched, because this orphan boy was so happy at the arrival of another child into the world. Feeling a warm glow all over, I turned back home. How could I have been so thoughtless? At that moment I completely forgot about that which I had been thinking of day and night. I was still at the gate when I shouted:

"Aliman! Did you hear the good news? Djorobek's daughter-in-law's had a girl. Do you hear? The poor woman had such a difficult pregnancy. Thank God, it's all over. .. " and in the middle of the sentence I stopped, as if I had suddenly bit down hard on a sore tooth.

Aliman stood there in silence, her eyes on the ground, biting her lip till it showed white. What was she thinking of at that moment? Perhaps the thought had flashed through her mind that when she had her baby no one would carry the news from house to house with such joy. I was burning with shame at my clumsiness. Not daring to look at her, I sat down at the hearth and began adding firewood to the fire, though there was no need for it. When I turned round, Aliman was standing by the wall, her eyes still lowered. My heart ached with pity for her. I made myself get up and go over to her.

"What's wrong? Do you feel ill?"

"No, Mother."

"If the work is too hard, why don't you stay home and rest a little?"

"No, it's not hard. What's hard about stringing tobacco leaves?" she said as she went out.

I decided that we could not put things off any longer.

I would tell her there was nothing to be ashamed of, that all new-born babies were alike and that her child would be my child as well. I would care for it as I had for my own children. I wanted her to



understand this. I didn't want her to hang her head. I wanted her to be proud, and to look people boldly in the face, for she had every right to be a mother.

These were my thoughts as I ran after her, shouting:

"Aliman! Wait a minute! I want to talk to you! Wait!"

She pretended not to hear and walked on without looking back.

All day long I fretted, thinking: "This can't go on. I'll tell her tonight for certain. It'll be easier on both of us." But it was not to be. When I returned home from work that evening Aliman was not there. I waited for a while and then began to worry. What could have happened? Where was she so long? Just as I went out to look for her I saw Bektash. He said nothing as he opened the gate. He was carrying a huge armload of grass. First he dumped the grass into the cow's trough and only then did he say in a low voice:

"Auntie Tolgonai, Aliman said you shouldn't look for her. She said she's going back to her family in Kaindy."

My knees buckled under me and I sat down on the doorstep.

"When did she leave?"

"After lunch. About two hours ago. She left in a passing lorry."

I felt crushed, so sick at heart, so hopeless. It was as if the hour of my death were near. Bektash tried to comfort me.

"Don't you worry, Auntie Tolgonai. The driver took her into the cab. It's fine inside."

"Oh, Bektash, Bektash! If it were only that," I thought. Still, I was grateful to him for his naive comforting. He was quite a strapping lad by then and worked as a driver. As I looked at him I marvelled at how tall and broad shouldered he had grown. His walk and his voice were those of a man. And his face was calm and friendly. I had liked him very much as a child and was glad he had come to be with me at such a trying time. Bektash brought some water from the ditch, set the samovar, sprinkled the yard and began to sweep it.

"You sit back and rest, Auntie Tolgonai," he said. "I'll spread a rug under the apple-tree. Mother will be over. She said she hasn't had any of your tea in a long time. She'll be over soon."

After Aliman left, the days dragged on endlessly.

How could I ever have thought I was alone in the world? No, I had never known what true loneliness was. I held out for three days and then found I could stand it no more. My house was no home and my life was no life. I might just as well have set out wandering. Whenever I thought of Aliman and of how she was faring there, things would be even worse. If only her family in Kaindy received her well. But what if they were taunting her: Ah, remember when you didn't even want to listen to us and said it was none of our business? You thought you could manage very well by yourself, but now you've come crawling back to us in shame, now you find you suddenly need us. Could they have said such things to her? Yes, they could. And if they did, how would she take it? She was so proud, how could she stand the humiliation of it? Heaven forbid, she might even take her own life. Ah, Aliman, Aliman! If you were here with me, I'd take all the shame upon myself and I'd never let anyone hurt you. I thought it over and said to myself: "No, this won't do. I'll go there and see how things are for myself. I'll try to coax her into returning home, maybe she'll listen to me. How wonderful it would be if she came back. If she doesn't want to well then, there's nothing I can do. I'll bless her and come back alone." I made my mind up and set out the very next day. Aisha was to look after the house and the cow. Bektash stopped a passing lorry, I climbed into the back and was off to Kaindy.

When we had left the village behind and were driving along the dirt road I noticed a woman on the path in the stubble. I recognised her at once - it was Aliman! My dearest, sweetest one, she was coming back home to me! I banged on the roof of the cab, shouting: "Stop! Stop!" The lorry was going too fast to stop at once, and when it did I grabbed my bag and slid over the side. The cloud of dust we had raised enveloped everything like a dense fog. I even wondered if I had not dreamed I had seen my Aliman. When the dust had rolled off after the lorry I saw her again.

"Alima-a-an!" I cried at the top of my voice.

I don't remember how I reached her. All I remember is that we embraced and kissed and wept. We had missed each other so terribly that we could not even find the words to express all that we had thought about during those days. I stroked Aliman's face and kept repeating:

"You've come back, you've come back, my little daughter. You've come back to your mother!"

"Yes, I've come back. I've come back to you, Mother!" she replied.

As we stood embracing thus, the child within her suddenly moved, thumping her twice. We both felt its movements. Aliman placed her hands on her stomach and began to stroke it tenderly. The expression in her eyes at that moment seemed to change my whole life. How could such awful thoughts about her have ever entered my head! O, sacred motherhood! A single drop of joy such as this is worth a sea of sorrows. I pressed my face against her cheek and cried without shame.

"My dearest one, my sweetest girl! I worried so much about you!"

"Don't cry, Mother," she said. "Forgive me for being so foolish. I can never leave you. I tried, but nothing came of it. I was so homesick."

I felt that now was the time to have everything out. "Why did you leave? Were you angry at me?"

She was silent, as if weighing her answer. Finally she said with a sigh:

"Don't ask me about it, Mother. Why must you know? Don't you say anything and I won't say anything either. Don't torture me, Mother, it's bad enough as it is."

Once again she had shied away. It was always the same. Why couldn't she understand that by doing this she was only harming herself?

We had a long and rainy autumn that year. There wasn't a day without rain. We spent most of our time at home during these long grey rainy spells. Aliman was as miserable as the autumn. She became gloomier and gloomier, she stopped talking and laughing altogether, always thinking her own silent thoughts. I felt she was in her last days of pregnancy. No matter how I tried to rouse her, to cheer her up with some foolishness or caress, my efforts were in vain. After all, she was not a child to have her cares blown away with a kiss. Others too, tried to help her in her time of trial, but what could we do? Bektash brought us some straw one day and said his mother had taken to her bed again. I went to see her. Aisha was running a fever and had a cough.

"It's your own fault," I scolded. "You know you have to take care of yourself. Instead, you go gallivanting around the countryside in weather like this."

She smiled guiltily. She had nothing to say for herself, because she and three other women had just recently gone to a wedding in a near-by village in Bektash's cart. When I was ready to leave Aisha called to me.

"Wait a bit, Tolgonai. There's something I want to tell, you. I hope you won't be angry."

"Well, what is it?" I said, tuning back from the door.

"We didn't go to any wedding. I have no relatives in that village and you know it. We decided to do something, even though we didn't have your permission. Please forgive us for doing so, Tolgonai, we only wanted to do what was best. We found the man, you know, the shepherd, and set on him from all sides. We said Aliman was expecting the child any day and that he had never even shown his face in the village again. We told him that was no way to behave. But nothing came of it. In the first place, we found out he's already married, and in, the second place, he has no conscience. He wouldn't even listen to us. He said he didn't know what we were talking about. Then his wife realised what all the fuss was about. She turned out to be a real troublemaker, screaming and shouting. I can't bear to tell you how she shamed us and threw us out. On the way back we were caught in a shower and were soaked to the skin.

That's how I caught a cold. But that's not important. What should we do about Aliman?" Aisha pressed her fist to her mouth to stifle her sobs.

"Don't cry, Aisha," I said. "As long as I'm alive I'll look after her." And I left. What else could I say?

The following days were difficult. Aliman's time was drawing near and now I did not let her out of my sight. Whenever she'd go out into the yard I'd follow her. I didn't leave her alone for a moment. I was afraid I wouldn't be there to help her when she went into labour. Would I ever have annoyed her otherwise?

One day she bundled up and put on her shawl.

"Where are you going, dear?"

"I'm going down to the river," she said.

"I wouldn't if I were you. What do you want to go there for on such a nasty day? You'd better stay home."

"No, I'm going."

"Well then I'll go, too. I won't let you go alone."

The way she looked at me then. All that had been eating at her heart turned into venom.

"Why do you pester me so? What do you want? Why do you follow me around all day like a shadow? Leave me alone! Do you think I'll drop dead or something? Well, you needn't worry, I won't!" She banged the door and was gone.

It was as if she had banged it against my heart. I felt very hurt. Still, I could not sit at home and followed her outside. She was nowhere in sight and had probably gone down to the water-meadow.

The drizzle was so fine it was more like cold steam. The wind tore at the grey shreds of cloud. The orchard looked forlorn, its trees naked and cold, the branches black and wet. Everyone was indoors on a day like this. The street was deserted. I could barely make out the ridges of the dark mountains through the misty haze.

I waited a while and followed her. I didn't care how angry she'd be, it would be much worse if she would lie down on the wet earth when her time came. As I walked along the path at the back of the garden I saw Aliman. She was coming back, walking very slowly, dragging her feet, her eyes on the ground, I rushed home, put on the kettle and beat up some batter with eggs and sour cream. Then I spread a

clean cloth on the rug and brought in the prettiest of the winter apples. When Aliman came in and saw the cloth she smiled sadly at me.

"Are you cold, dear? Come and have some hot tea and pancakes," I said.

"No, I don't feel like eating, Mother. But I'll try an apple."

"Does anything bother you Aliman. Please tell me if it does."

But she only replied:

"Don't ask me, Mother I don't know what's come over me. I hate myself. And I had no right to shout at you like that. Just leave me in peace. She sighed heavily.

Night fell. As I was getting ready for bed I kept thinking unhappily that Aliman would find fault with whatever I said to her now. I fell asleep with this feeling of hurt. I usually woke up several times during the night to see how Aliman was, but this time sleep crushed me like a boulder. If I had known, would I ever have ever have shut my eyes? Why I'd have stayed awake for ten nights in a row, never once resting my head against the wall.

I don't remember when and why I suddenly woke up. When I looked around I could not see Aliman. I was still half in a daze and could not grasp things clearly. At first I thought she had gone out for a moment. I waited. No, there was no sound from anywhere. Then I went over and touched her bed. It was cold. My heart froze: that meant she had been gone a long time! I threw some clothes on and rushed outside. I ran about the yard, and the garden, and even out in the street. Then I began calling her: "Aliman! Aliman!" But she did not answer. I just started the dogs barking in the yards. Things went black before my eyes: she had left! Where could she have gone on such a dark night? What was I to do? Perhaps I could still catch up with her. As I crossed the threshold I thought I heard a moan and a cry coming from the barn. I rushed across the yard, threw open the barn door and nearly dropped the lantern, unable to believe my eyes: Aliman was lying on the straw. She was in labour and tossing feverishly.

"Why? Why didn't you tell me?" I shouted as I rushed over to her.

I wanted to help her. Fear gripped my heart when her blood-soaked dress slapped against my arm as I tried to raise her. Aliman was burning with fever. She gasped hoarsely and with great difficulty.

"I'm dying. I'm dying."

She must have been tossing there in pain for a long time. "God forbid!. God forbid!" I prayed, realising that she would not give birth by herself, that only a doctor could save her.

I ran over to Aisha's, banging on the window with all my might, shouting:

"Hurry! Get up! Bektash, harness the horses! Aliman's in a bad way! Hurry, dear, she's very bad!"

I woke them up, ran back to Aliman and gave her some water. Her teeth clattered on the rim of the cup, she was shaking with chills and was barely able to take two sips before she began to toss and moan again. Aisha came running over from her sick-bed out of breath. As soon as she saw Aliman she turned white and began to wail:

"Aliman, dearest, how dreadful! Aliman, my child! Don't be afraid. We'll take you to the hospital!"

Luckily, Bektash had come home late from work that day and had not taken the horses to the stable. They were still in his shed. In no time his cart rolled up to the barn. We threw some hay in it, then brought out blankets and pillows and the three of us managed to carry Aliman out of the barn and lay her in the cart. We started for the hospital immediately.

Oh, that muddy autumn road, oh, that black, cursed night... In those days we only had a hospital in Zarechye, and the bridge across the river was far down the road.

As soon as we drove out of the village Aliman's pains began again. She cried out and threw off the blankets. I held her head on my lap and kept covering her, holding the lantern up to her face, looking in to her eyes and trying to reassure her. Bektash tried to comfort her also.

"Hold on, Aliman," he said. "We'll be there soon. You'll see, we'll be there in no time. We're nearly at the bridge."

But it was miles to the bridge yet. If only he could have whipped on the horses, but he couldn't, it would have shaken Aliman too much. Then the rain came down in torrents. It was as if everything were against us: the blackness of the night, the cold rain, the mud, the pits and, bumps in the road. Aliman was shaking with convulsions, moaning, screaming, and then suddenly she quietened down and began to gasp hoarsely.

"Aliman! Aliman! What's the matter?" I said in alarm putting my arm around her and holding up the lantern. Her burning eyes looked straight at me.

"Stop! I'm dying! Stop!" she forced the words from her parched, blackened lips and began to gasp for air again.

We stopped the cart.

"Raise my head up higher," she said. "I can't breathe." And she began to cry. Then hurriedly swallowing her tears, she began to speak: "Mother, my dearest mother. . . everything's on fire inside me. I've no

strength left ... I'm dying... Thank you for everything you've done, Mother. Forgive me ... If Kasym were alive ... Oh-h-h, Kasym, I m dying ... Forgive me ... "

I began to plead:

"No, dearest, you won't die. Just hold out a little longer, darling. We're nearly at the bridge. Can you hear me, you won't die!"

She was racked with pain again. Clenching her teeth and losing consciousness, she struggled with the last of her strength.

"Bektash!" I ordered. "Take her under the arms and raise her up. Hurry! And for God's sake don't be shy!"

Bektash raised Aliman up and I tried to help the baby. Then Bektash began to sob loudly and once again I recalled the roar of the troop train and the wheels began to clatter in my ears; the wind carried the cry: "Mama-a-a! Alima-a-an!" And then the new-born baby cried. O, Life, why are you so cruel? Why are you so blind? The child was born, but Aliman was dying. I had time only to wrap the wet, naked little body in my skirt. When I looked up, the mother, Aliman, was hanging lifelessly in Bektash's arms. Her head hung sideways her arms dangled loosely.

"Aliman!" I cried in a strangled voice and grabbed her wrist. I could not find the pulse.

In a single flash life and death had clashed together. When we turned back, it was nearly dawn. Large white snow-flakes fluttered down in the twilight. They fell softly to the ground. All was silent, there was not a sound anywhere. A white silence had descended upon the world. And in this white silence the tired horse plodded along soundlessly, their manes white, their tails white. Bektash wept silently in the cart. He did not drive the horses, they plodded onwards themselves. He cried the whole way. I walked alongside, the child under my jacket on my breast, and the white snow on the ground seemed black to me.

## 16

This was the last time the war came back to remind me of itself. The road I travelled that morning was the hardest road of my life. I thought it would be better to die than go on living like this. But the infant, warmed by my body, was a wriggling, warm, soft bundle that cried without stop. As I carried him I spoke to him: "How unfortunate you are! Your very first cry was your farewell to your mother." Then, from some faraway place came the thought: "But life has not died off completely, a little shoot has been left." Then another thought replaced it: "How can he ever survive if he hasn't even tasted his mother's milk? No, he won't last long." I longed so much for the child to live that I prayed to fate: "Please, let this one live at least! Don't let him die. Maybe this one will survive! Maybe he'll come through somehow." Thus I trudged along, in turn despairing, hoping and again despairing, and morning crept up upon us unawares as we reached the village.

It was still snowing heavily and silently, and everything was white and silent about us. In the midst of all this silence the ruins of the abandoned street were more terrifying than ever. Hardly a trace remained of the work that had been begun here seven years before. Snow circled over the dead street, covering the yawning gaps of the ruins and the forlorn clumps of dry nettles and weeds with drifts. In what was once to be the yard of Aliman and Kasym, as a monument to their cares and dreams, there rose a heap of stone and rubble.

Aliman, forever at peace now, was pale, her eyes were closed. Her head rocked from side to side with the motion of the cart, snow fell on her face and did not melt.

Bektash jumped down as we reached the first houses and for the first time in his life cried out loudly in a man's sobbing voice, telling the people of a person's death. The villagers began running out of their houses, crowding round us with tears in their eyes, Aisha came running, wailing at the top of her voice, then she took the child from me and carried it home.

We buried Aliman the next day. According to custom, a woman is not supposed to go to the cemetery, but I went, and no one said a word to me: I had no men in my house to keep to tradition, I buried Aliman myself, I rested her on the bottom of her grave myself and covered her with the first handful of earth. The snow was thick and fluffy that day. Soon the red mound of clay became a white hill.

I planted flowers on Aliman's grave in the spring, I plant them there every spring. For she loved flowers so dearly.

Well, life went on. During the first days of his life Grandfather Djorobek's daughter-in-law nursed Zhannbolot. Then I began giving him goat's milk. We had our share of sorrow, there's really no sense talking about it. In a word, it was his fate to survive and he did. I am grateful to fate for that. He is twelve now. The doctor who cared for him when he was little and who is now a famous man in our parts always says when he meets me:

"Well, Grannie, how's your grandson coming along?"

"Thank God," I say, "he's a real *djigit* now!"

He looks at me with a smile and says:

"That's good. Bring him up to be a good man."

He has known Zhanbolot and me a long time. Zhannbolot was only about eighteen months old then. He was a frail baby. Once he caught cold and became very ill. His lips turned blue, he couldn't open his eyes and could barely breathe. I bundled him up and hurried to the hospital. It was the middle of the night again and winter, and I waded across the river. The doctor was a very young fellow, he must have just



finished his studies. When he saw me shivering from cold and drenched to the skin he became frightened.

"Are you mad?" he scolded. "Who let you cross the river? Where are his parents?"

"I'm his father and his mother, son. Don't let him die. If he dies, I shall, too," I said.

He was up with the baby all night, giving him injection every two hours. He gave me some dry clothes to change into and some medicine, but by morning I was burning and coughing blood. I lay there in a haze, hardly conscious at all. I only recall the doctor coming over to my bed putting his hand on my forehead and saying:

"Don't give up, Mother. Hold on. Your grandson is already laughing. He's fine."

"Then I'll get well, too," I whispered.

Maybe that's the only reason I came through, because my grandson had survived.

An interesting thing happened this past spring. During school holidays Zhanbolot was running about and before I knew it he had dragged Kasym's old bicycle out into the yard. It was the very same one that had hung on the wall in the barn for twenty years. Well, he dragged it out and set about repairing it. I didn't say anything. After all he's just a boy. I thought, he'd fuss around with it for a while and forget it. There was really nothing to fix: all the metal parts were covered with rust and the tires had cracked. His friends came over and laughed at him. They said it was a pile of junk, just an old-fashioned rattletrap. But he was stubborn and kept at it. I don't know if anything would ever have come of it if not for Bektash. He took the matter in hand and set to repairing the bicycle with great gusto, just like a boy, though he's the father of a family now. Bektash loves Zhanbolot and will always go over to school and talk to the teachers if there's anything amiss. He got married when Aisha was still alive. She died about three years after Aliman. I mourned my dear friend greatly. We had seen so much sorrow together. Bektash grew up to be a fine man. He is intelligent and hard-working. He has three children now and his wife Gulsun is a good neighbour. Bektash has been a combine-operator for many years.

Well, one day Zhanbolot showed up with his bicycle all polished and oiled and covered with grease himself.

"Grannie," he said, "see what Father's bicycle looks like now!"

My hands felt numb at his words, they made me both happy and distressed. But he was very proud.

"I know how to ride it too. Watch me!"

His feet didn't reach the pedals if he sat on it properly so he hung on sideways, leaning over, and off he went, wobbling from one side to the other, about to fall off at any moment.

"Get off, you'll fall!" I shouted.

But that only made him go faster. He passed through the gate and pedalled out into the street. I ran after him. He was getting pretty fast when he suddenly lurched and fell together with the bicycle. He hurt himself badly. I ran over to him, helped him up and began to scold.

"Did you want to kill yourself? That's all I need! Don't let me ever see you on that bike again!"

"I won't fall any more, Grannie," he said. "I just wanted to try and see. I never fell off a bike before."

I laughed. Then I noticed Bektash standing at the gate. He might have just been standing there and looking. He said nothing. But we understood each other.

Soon harvesting began, Bektash came over one evening.

"I want to take our Zhanbolot to be my helper on my combine," he said.

"If you think he'll manage take him," I agreed.

Though I permitted him to go, in two days' time I set out to see how he was getting on. After all, he was still a child, perhaps things would be too hard for him during harvesting.

My Zhanbolot was working as a helper. When he saw me he shouted as if he were on a top of a mountain:

"Grannie! Here I am!"

Bektash was at the wheel. He waved to me and bowed.

I sat in the shade of a tree near the irrigation ditch till evening, watching the harvesting. Lorries raised clouds of dust on the road as they drove back and forth, taking the grain to the threshing-floors.

At twilight the combine-drivers came over to rest. Zhanbolot looked tired and proud as he walked along, trying to imitate Bektash, and then just as silently and puffing just as noisily, he began to wash to the waist in the irrigation ditch. When he saw the bundle in my hands he cried out happily:

"Grannie, did you bring me some apples?"

"Yes, I did," I answered.

Then he ran up to me, put his arms around me and kissed me.

Bektash chuckled.

"What were you putting on such airs for?" he said. "You should have done that long ago. All right, snuggle up to your grannie, you won't have time to later."

We sat down to supper on the grass near the field wagon. The bread was freshly baked and hot. Zhanbolot broke up the hot cakes.

"Here, Grannie!" he said.

I blessed the bread, and with the very first bite I took I tasted the familiar smell of the combine operator's hands. It tasted of kerosene, iron, straw and ripe grain. Yes, just exactly as it had then! The tears in my throat washed it down. And the words formed in my mind: "Bread is immortal, do you hear me, Kasym, my son! And life is immortal, and toil is immortal!"

The men would not let me go home. They said I was their guest and should stay the night in the field. They made me a bed on the straw. As I looked up at the sky that night I fancied the Milky Way was sprinkled with fresh golden straw, spilled grain and chaff. And in the starry heights, across the Way of the Reaper, like a far-off song, a troop train was fading into the distance, the clatter of its wheels very faint now. I fell asleep to the dying clatter with the knowledge that a new tiller had taken his place in the world that day. May he have a long life, may he have as much grain as there are stars in the sky.

I rose at dawn and started home, not wanting to disturb the others.

It had been a long time since I had seen such a sunrise over the mountains. It had been a long time since I had heard a skylark singing so sweetly. It flew higher and higher into the clearing sky, hanging suspended there like a little grey ball, beating and fluttering like a human heart, its song ringing over the steppe, "Look! It's our skylark singing!" Suvankul had said once. How strange, we had even had our own skylark. You, too, are immortal, my skylark!

17

"O, my cherished field, you are resting now after the harvesting. No voices can be heard, no lorries raise a trail of dust on the dirt roads, no harvesters are to be seen and the herds have not yet been put out to graze in the stubble. You have given us your fruits and are resting now as a woman after child-birth. You will rest till the autumn ploughing. There are only the two of us, you and I, and no one else. You know the whole story of my life. Today is the day of commemoration. Today I bow down to the memory of Suvankul, Kasym, Maselbek, Djainak and Aliman. As long as I live I shall remember them. The time will come and I shall tell Zhanbolot everything. If he has been blessed with a mind and a heart he will

understand. But what about all the others, all the other people in the world? I must speak to them. How can I reach everyone's heart?

"Sun, you shine in the sky, you circle round the Earth, you tell them.

"Rain-cloud, fall upon the world in a bright shower and with every raindrop tell them!

s"Earth, Mother-Earth, you support us all upon your breast, you feed people in every corner of the world. Tell them, dear Earth, tell them!"

"No, Tolgonai. You tell them. You are a Human Being. You are above everything. You are wiser than all others. You are a Human Being. You tell them!"

18

"Are you leaving, Tolgonai?"

"Yes. If I am still alive, I shall come again. Farewell, Field. "