

AIKOKUL TURSUNBEK KYZY

Twelve Kilometres

On Eki Chakyrym



STORIES

Translated from the Iradi by Aidana Mukash kzyz



ARSHA BOOKS

TWELVE KILOMETRES

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ARSHA BOOKS

Talas

Arsha Books

Köhne Diz, Talas

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This is a work of fiction. The events of 2006–2009 described here are a matter of public record. The people are not. Any resemblance between the characters and any person, living or dead, is coincidental, except where the author has said otherwise in her note.

Earlier versions of “Signatures” and “Bazaar Chubar” were read by the author at Mor-Wave evenings in Talas in 2013 and 2014.

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for my mother

Kara-Unkur valley, 1954 – Talas, 2014

*and for my father,
who taught me the language*

Suu agat, tash kalat.

The water flows on; the stone stays.

— Iradi proverb

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A NOTE ON THE TITLE

THE AGREEMENT SIGNED IN BISHKEK IN SEPTEMBER 2007 CREATED, ON each side of the Qara-Chik line, a restricted zone twelve kilometres deep. No tanks, no artillery and no combat aircraft may enter it. Everything else may: herds, brides, funerals, walnut traders, priests, children going to school, the post. Twelve kilometres up and twelve kilometres down, a strip twenty-four kilometres wide and nearly two thousand long, a country inside the country, where the only things forbidden are the large ones.

I was twenty-two that autumn. I read the full text of the agreement in the *Talas Herald*, folded small, on a bus. I remember thinking that twelve kilometres was a great distance. It is about as far as you can see from a pass on a clear day. It is a day's walk with a loaded donkey. It is, near enough, the distance from my mother's village in the Kara-Unkur valley down to the bridge at the foot of the hills, where the Gendarmerie put their pole across the road.

It took me some years to understand that the distance that mattered was not twelve kilometres, but the four hundred metres of empty road between the two posts, and that most families in Iraq have a road like that somewhere, whether they cross it or not.

These stories are about the years between the Bill of Sale and the marking of the line: from the winter of 2006, when a government in Talas prepared to sell the country, to the spring of 2009, when men in two kinds of uniform went into the mountains with concrete pillars and numbered them. I have tried to keep to what is known about those years and to invent only the people. Where a story touches a public event — a speech, a letter, a mine — I have followed the record as it was printed at the time. A few people whose names you

will know pass through these pages. I have tried to give them nothing to do that they did not do.

The last piece is not a story. I have put it at the end because my mother asked to be in this book, and that is where she would have wanted to sit: by the door, where she could see who was coming.

*A. T. k.
Talas, 2015*

O N E

Contingency Papers

December 2006 – February 2007, Talas

DINARA ABDIEVA HAD COME HOME FROM CHICAGO WITH TWO suitcases, a master's degree in public policy and a winter coat that was wrong for Talas. The coat was too thin for the wind that comes off the Alatau in January and too smart for the corridors of the old Party building on Toktogul Street, where the new Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been given the third floor.

She did not mind the coat. She minded nothing that winter. The Americans had gone on the third of December. On the seventh the Supreme Court ruled that their going made Iraq independent, and on the ninth Prime Minister Orobekov proclaimed the Democratic Republic from the steps of Legislative Hall in a snowstorm. Dinara stood in the crowd with snow in her hair and sang the anthem with people she did not know, and she thought, *We are building it. Us. Now.* She was twenty-nine. Her scholarship contract required two years of public service, and she would have done twenty for nothing.

They gave her a desk by the radiator, which was either very hot or dead cold, and a title, Translator (Russian, English), Department of Neighbouring States, and on the eleventh of December a folder.

"Border consultations," said her head of section, Mr. Seitkaziev, a tidy man who had worked for the territorial administration and wore the same green tie every day. "Technical annexes. Water quotas,

grazing rights, that sort of thing. The other side drafts in Russian. We need clean English for the lawyers in Washington." He smiled. "Our lawyers in Washington. We have lawyers in Washington now."

"What's the timeline?"

"Yesterday," he said, the way they said it in Chicago. He had never been to Chicago.



THE FIRST ANNEX WAS ABOUT WATER. SHE KNEW WATER. EVERYONE IN Irad knows water. The Toktogul reservoir, the summer releases, the cubic metres per second at the Uch-Kurgan gauge. The Russian was heavy, Soviet-ministerial, full of *in accordance with* and *on the basis of*, and she made it light and plain and was pleased with herself.

The second annex was about grazing. It listed pastures by their Soviet survey numbers, and beside each number it gave a column headed *Party responsible for administration from the date of entry into force*. In that column, against the summer pastures of the Karatau, stood the word *Kazakhstan*.

She read it twice. She assumed the column meant joint administration, or shared transit, the kind of thing two states agree when herds cross a frontier. She translated it exactly and wrote a query in the margin in pencil: *Responsible for administration: confirm meaning?*

The folder came back the next day without her query. Someone had rubbed it out.



THE THIRD ANNEX WAS MAPS.

They arrived in a cardboard tube on the twentieth of January: Soviet 1:200,000 sheets with lines drawn over them in coloured felt

pen, the kind schoolchildren use. Green, orange and blue. She was to translate the legends.

She spread the sheets out on the floor of the empty meeting room at the end of the corridor, because there was nowhere else big enough, and knelt on the carpet in her stockings and looked at them.

The green line ran around the Talas valley and down to Jalal-Abad. The blue line ran around the Chu and the steppe and the Karatau. The orange line ran around the Fergana rim, the farm belt and the hills above it as far as Arslanbob. Between them there was nothing left. No white paper at all. The lines met each other everywhere and enclosed everything, and the legend in the corner said, in Russian, *Proposed lines of administrative responsibility following dissolution of the Party of the First Part*.

The Party of the First Part was Irad.

She sat back on her heels. In the corridor somebody was laughing on the telephone. The radiator ticked. She found she was looking at the small black dot on the blue side of the blue line that was Nurzhan, where her mother lived, and then at the dot on the green side that was Talas, where she was kneeling, and she was trying to work out, very calmly, as if it were a question in an exam, which country she would be translating for in a year.

She rolled the maps up and put them back in the tube and translated the legends, accurately, into clean English. It took her the afternoon. *Dissolution* she wrote as *dissolution*. There is no lighter word.



SHE DID NOT SLEEP MUCH IN FEBRUARY. SHE WENT TO WORK AND translated what she was given. The escrow clauses came in the second week: compensation payable to the Party of the First Part into accounts in Zurich, and concession shares in the NurGaz fields, the

antimony works at Sary-Bulak and the Toktogul cascade, to be allotted to companies whose names were only initials. She translated the initials.

At lunch she sat in the canteen with the other young ones, the returnees, the ones who had come back from Washington and Boston and Chicago with their degrees to build the state, and they talked about salaries and flats and the new Kazakh restaurant on Manas Avenue. Twice she opened her mouth to say something, and twice she said something about the restaurant instead.

Once she asked Mr. Seitkaziev, in the corridor, very lightly: "The orange line on the maps. Is that a negotiating position?"

He looked at her for a moment, kindly, she thought afterwards. Almost kindly.

"They are contingency papers," he said. "Every government has contingency papers. You plan for everything. You plan for the earthquake. It doesn't mean you want the earthquake."

"No," she said.

"Clean English," he said, and patted her arm, and went into his office.



ON THE NIGHT OF THE TWENTY-SECOND OF FEBRUARY SHE STAYED late. The building emptied by seven. By nine there was only the watchman, who sat on the ground floor with a small television and a large thermos and did not come upstairs.

The photocopier was in an alcove by the stairs. It was an American machine, a gift of the territorial administration, with a plaque on it saying so, and it was slow and very loud. Every page sounded like a door slamming in an empty house.

She had the folder. All of it: the water, the grazing, the escrow, the initials, and the maps, which she had to copy a quarter at a time and

tape together. She stood at the machine for two hours. She had decided nothing. She had come to the alcove with the folder under her arm, as if she were carrying it somewhere, and she had lifted the lid and put the first page face down on the glass and pressed the green button, and the machine had slammed its door, and after that each page simply came after the one before.

When she had finished there were three copies and the original. She sat on the floor of the alcove with her back against the warm side of the machine and looked at them.

Three. She did not know why she had made three. One for whom? There were people she could think of. A cousin of her mother's on the Nurzhan city council. A man she had met at a reception who wrote for the *Talas Herald*. A DPI deputy who had once been to dinner at her parents' flat and who was said to be furious with the Prime Minister about something. She did not know any of them well. She did not know which of them would burn the papers and which would burn her.

She put the original back in the folder and the folder back in the safe, and locked it with the key she was not supposed to have kept. She put the three copies in three plastic bags from the bazaar, and the three bags in her thin Chicago coat, and walked home through the snow past Legislative Hall, where the flag was up and lit and stiff in the wind.



ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH OF FEBRUARY, A SUNDAY, SHE WAS AT HER parents' flat in Nurzhan for her father's birthday. The television was on in the corner with the sound down, and the family was at the table, and her uncle was making the toast, when her mother said, "Look," and turned the sound up.

It was Toktarov, in front of a crowd outside the Nurzhan city hall. He had papers in his hand and was reading from them.

He read the legend of the maps. He read it in Russian first and then in Iradi, slowly, so that people could follow. *Proposed lines of administrative responsibility following dissolution.* He held up a map. The camera could not get close enough to show the colours.

"It is a bill of sale," Toktarov said. "A bill of sale for our country."

Her mother had both hands over her mouth. Her father had stood up. Her uncle was still holding his glass in the air. Dinara sat very still and looked at the paper in Toktarov's hand, trying to see whether there were strips of tape across the back, where the quarters of a map had been joined.

She could not see. The camera was too far away. It might have been her copy. It might have been anyone's. There would have been other copies; there are always other copies, in other safes, in other ministries, in other capitals. Nobody ever told her, and she never asked.

The next morning she did not go back to Talas. Her two years of public service were never completed, and in the spring a letter came from the scholarship board asking her to repay the cost of her degree, which she has been doing ever since, at four hundred som a month.

The thin coat is still in her mother's wardrobe in Nurzhan. She has never worn it again. There is a bazaar bag in the inside pocket, empty, folded small. She does not know what happened to the other two.

T W O

Diesel

January 2007, the Chu valley

THE HERDERS CAME IN FROM THE MOIYNKUM ON THE MORNING OF THE sixteenth, about three hundred of them, on horseback and in old trucks and on tractors pulling trailers full of their sons. They stopped where the Chu road crosses the main canal east of Nurzhan, turned the tractors sideways across both lanes, and lit fires in oil drums. They had come because diesel had gone from forty-one som a litre to sixty-eight in five weeks, and a herder who cannot buy diesel cannot get hay to his winter camp, and a herder who cannot get hay to his winter camp in January is going to lose his sheep.

Erkin Kurmanov was twenty years old and had been a police constable of the Chu District for seven months. He knew all this because his grandfather had told him the same thing on the telephone the night before, at length, with figures.

"Sixty-eight," his grandfather had said. "Do you know what sixty-eight is, in sheep?"

"Ata, I'm on duty tomorrow."

"I know you're on duty. That's why I'm telling you."

His grandfather wintered on the Moiynkum with the Boztorgoy, as the family had always done, and came into Nurzhan only to see the doctor and to complain about the price of things. His father had left the steppe in 1979 for the refinery, married a Nurzhan girl, and

registered his son in a hospital in Nurzhan under a surname with a Russian ending. Erkin had been to the winter camp perhaps ten times in his life. He could ride, a little. He spoke the steppe dialect badly enough to be laughed at.



THERE WERE FORTY POLICE AT THE JUNCTION BY TEN O'CLOCK, IN TWO buses, with helmets and plastic shields that the Americans had left behind and that no one had ever used. The lieutenant was a man from Talas named Ibraev. He walked up and down the line telling them to stand still and look calm, and he did not look calm himself.

Across thirty metres of frozen road the herders stood round their fires. Some of them had brought sheep in the trailers, to show, Erkin supposed, what was at stake. The sheep stood packed together with frost on their backs and looked at the police.

At eleven a man from the district administration came out from Nurzhan in a Toyota, walked halfway across the thirty metres, read something from a sheet of paper that nobody could hear over the wind, and walked back. The herders jeered. A boy threw a frozen horse dropping, which hit a shield with a sound like a stone.

Erkin was looking for his grandfather.

He had not said he was coming. Old men with bad knees do not ride two days through the snow to stand at a roadblock. But Erkin looked anyway, at every fur hat, every grey beard, every old man in a sheepskin coat sitting on a tractor seat with his hands under his armpits. There were a great many old men in sheepskin coats.

At half past twelve he found him. Not his grandfather. His grandfather's brother, Kalmat, whom he had last seen at a memorial feast four years before, standing by the nearest oil drum with a stick in one hand and a bowl of tea in the other. Kalmat was looking straight at him across the thirty metres. He did not wave. He raised

the bowl a little, as you raise a bowl to someone at the far end of a feast, and drank.

Erkin did not know what to do with his face. In the end he nodded, very slightly, inside his helmet.



AT TWO O’CLOCK A SECOND BUS ARRIVED, FROM TALAS, FROM THE ministry, not police. Men in black, without shields. Their officer walked down the police line without speaking to Lieutenant Ibraev and stopped in the middle of the road and lifted a loudhailer.

He said that this was an illegal obstruction of a state highway. He said that the government had taken note of the herders’ concerns. He said that they had ten minutes.

The herders did not move. Nobody really believed it. In Iraq, in January 2007, nobody yet believed that anything was going to happen to anybody. The state had been born six weeks before in a snowstorm. It did not yet know what it was. You did not imagine it firing at its own grandfathers.

After ten minutes the men in black walked forward.



AFTERWARDS, AT THE INQUIRY, WHICH SAT FOR ONE DAY IN MARCH and whose report was never published, there were many versions of who fired first and why. A shot from among the herders, said the men in black. A tractor driven at the line, said the district administration. A warning shot into the air that came down in the wrong place, said Lieutenant Ibraev, who resigned in April and went back to Talas.

What Erkin remembered was the sheep.

The men in black had reached the first fire. There was shoving and shouting, and an oil drum went over and scattered burning wood across the road, and the sheep in the nearest trailer began to scream. If you have never heard a trailer of sheep scream, you will not believe the sound. A boy jumped up onto the trailer to calm them, and someone fired, and then many people fired.

Erkin did not fire. He had a pistol, and he did not draw it. He was not brave. He had simply forgotten he had it. He stood in the road with his shield in front of him, as he had been told to, and watched the herders run, and the horses break loose, and the sheep come pouring out of the trailer and run in every direction across the frozen fields, grey on white, with the boy who had jumped up to calm them lying on the trailer bed among the straw.

He did not see Kalmat. He looked, and Kalmat was not there.



SEVEN PEOPLE WERE TAKEN TO HOSPITAL IN NURZHAN, BY THE official count. The official count did not mention the boy on the trailer, because he was taken not to Nurzhan but back to the Moiyunkum, wrapped in a felt, in the back of the same trailer. His people did not want the city doctors to have him.

Erkin went home at midnight. His mother had kept his supper warm. She put it in front of him without a word and sat down across the table, and then the telephone rang in the hall.

It was his grandfather. Erkin could hear him from the kitchen, though his mother held the receiver against her chest.

"Is he there? Put him on."

His mother looked at Erkin. Erkin shook his head.

"He's asleep, Ata," his mother said.

There was a silence on the line. Then the old man said something in the steppe dialect, with the *sh* where Nurzhan people say *ch*, that

his mother did not repeat. She listened for a long time. Then she said, "Yes. Yes, Ata. I'll tell him," and put the receiver down very gently and came back into the kitchen.

"What did he say?" said Erkin.

His mother sat down again.

"He said Kalmat got home. He said the sheep are lost, most of them, they ran onto the canal ice and it broke." She folded her hands on the oilcloth. "He said he wants to know if you shot anybody."

"I didn't."

"I told him you didn't."

"Did he believe you?"

His mother did not answer. She got up and took his plate, though he had not eaten, and scraped it into the bin, and stood at the sink with her back to him. Outside, the refinery flares lit the snow orange all the way to the edge of the steppe.

In March the clans formed the Front, and the herders of the Moiynkum rode north to join it. Erkin was not on duty at the canal bridge again. In April he handed in his badge and went to work at the refinery with his father, guarding pipe.

His grandfather never telephoned again. When he died, in 2011, Erkin drove out to the Moiynkum for the funeral and stood at the back. Kalmat, who was very old by then, came and stood next to him and said nothing for a long time.

Then he said, in the steppe dialect, slowly, so that Erkin would understand: "You had a gun. I saw it. You didn't take it out."

"No."

"Good," said Kalmat. "Good." And he put his hand flat on Erkin's back, between the shoulder blades, as you put your hand on a horse to let it know where you are, and left it there until the prayers were finished.

T H R E E

Kobozev Is Listening

25 February 2007, Nurzhan

VALENTINA KRAVCHENKO HAD CALLED THE CITY KOBOZEV FOR SIXTY-one years and saw no reason to stop. She had been born in it, in a barracks by the railway sidings, in the winter of 1946, and her father had helped to lay the first pipe from the oil field when the city was only a slogan and a row of tents. In 1992 they renamed it Nurzhan, “light of life”, which Valentina said sounded like a shampoo. She did not say it outside the flat.

The flat was on the fifth floor of a block in the Navbahor microdistrict, which had been called the Twenty-Second Microdistrict when it was built, and the kitchen window looked out over the refinery. At night the flares lit the ceiling orange. Valentina had not slept in a dark room since 1974.

On Sunday afternoon the whole family was in the kitchen because the kitchen had the radio. Her son Sergei sat at the table in his undershirt with his refinery jacket over the back of his chair. His wife Lena stood at the stove. Their daughter Katya, who was sixteen, sat on the windowsill with her knees up, half listening and half typing on her telephone.

The radio was saying that Toktarov would speak at three.

“Who is Toktarov?” said Valentina. She knew perfectly well who Toktarov was. She liked to make them say it.

"Mama. He was Majority Leader of the Senate."

"Majority of what?"

"Of the Senate, Mama. Under the Americans."

"Ah," said Valentina. "The Americans." She said it the way she said *Nurzhan*.

*
**

AT THREE O'CLOCK THERE WAS A LONG TIME OF CROWD NOISE AND then a voice, not a young one, speaking Russian first. A good Russian, Valentina noticed. An officer's Russian. Not the careful school Russian of the young ones, nor the Russian the Americans' Iradis spoke, with English stuck in it like bones in fish.

He said he was standing in front of the city council of Nurzhan, by its invitation. He said that he had in his hand documents from the government in Talas. He said he would read from them.

He read.

It took him a long time, because he read everything twice, once in Russian and once in Iradi, and the Iradi was slower. Katya stopped typing. Lena turned the gas off under the pot. Sergei sat with both hands round his cold tea and did not drink it.

He read about the lines on the maps. He read the names of the three neighbouring countries and the pieces of Irad each was to receive. When he came to the Chu, and the oil fields, and the city of Nurzhan, he paused, and read that part a third time.

"To be transferred to the administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan."

The crowd on the radio made a sound Valentina had heard only once before in her life: in the summer of 1989, in this same city, outside the bread shop on Lenin Street, when the shop girl came out and said there was no bread today and would be none tomorrow.

*
**

"THEY CAN'T DO THAT," SAID KATYA, FROM THE WINDOWSILL. IN Russian. Then, as if she had heard herself, in Iradi: "*Alar antip bolboyt.*" Then a mixture of both, with an English word in it that Valentina did not catch.

"Speak properly," said Valentina. "One language at a time."

"I am speaking properly, Babushka. This is properly. Everyone talks like this."

"Chala-Irad," said Sergei, without turning round. Half-Iradi. It was what the boys at the refinery called the young ones who mixed. He said it gently, and Katya threw a clothes peg at him, and nobody laughed.

On the radio Toktarov was saying that it was a bill of sale. A bill of sale for our country. He said that a government which sells its people is no longer a government. He said that from today Irad would be administered as a special economic zone, in trust, until the people could decide. He said there was no longer a sovereign, so there was no one with the right to sell Irad. *No one can sell what no one owns.*

The crowd roared. Sergei put his tea down.



"WELL," SAID VALENTINA, INTO THE SILENCE AFTER THE ROAR. "So now we're Kazakhs."

"We're not Kazakhs, Mama. He's stopped it. Didn't you hear? He stopped it."

"He read a paper. Anybody can read a paper. In 1991 Chernov read a paper. In 1992 Alimbekov read a paper. In 1992 they read a paper in Washington and the Americans came. I have heard a great many papers."

"Mama—"

"I'm not saying he's lying," said Valentina. "I'm saying he's reading."

The telephone rang in the hall. Lena went out to answer it and came back almost at once.

"It's the shift office," she said to Sergei. "Everybody. All shifts. Now."



HE PUT ON HIS REFINERY JACKET. THE JACKET WAS ORANGE, AND THE city wore its colour in the same way it wore the light of the flares; nobody saw it anymore. Lena went into the bedroom and came back with his winter boots and a plastic bag with bread and sausage in it. She said nothing, and she did not cry. In this family, Valentina thought, the women never cried in front of a man who was going out the door, because it brought him back worse, and the men never asked why.

"What do they want with you?" said Valentina. "You're a pump man."

"They want us at the installations, Mama. At the gates. Bekzatov's people. In case." He did up the jacket. "The council's lending the police. NurGaz is paying. It'll be a few nights."

"In case of what?"

Sergei did not answer. He did not know. Nobody in the city knew yet what in case meant. In case Talas sent soldiers. In case Talas had no soldiers to send. In case of the Kazakhs, who were reading the same paper in Astana. In case of anything.

Katya had got down off the windowsill. She stood in the kitchen doorway in her socks, looking at her father's orange back.

Valentina pushed herself up from the table and went to the drawer under the window where she kept string and buttons and the things that had no other place. She took out a strip of white ribbon, the cheap kind, from a box of Easter candles, and her scissors, and her needle with the white cotton still in it.

"Come here."

"Mama, I'm late —"

"Come here."

He came. She sewed the ribbon onto the front of his jacket, on the left side, above the pocket, with four quick stitches. It took a moment. He stood bent over so she could reach, as he had stood when he was eight and she buttoned his school coat.

"What's that for?" said Katya.

Valentina bit off the thread.

"I don't know," she said. "The Iradi women in the next block do it. When the men go out. White is for luck." She patted the ribbon flat. "I saw them do it in 1992, when the men went out to the barricades, and then most of those men came home." She looked up at her son. "So."

Sergei touched the ribbon. Then he kissed his mother on the top of her head, and his wife on the mouth, and his daughter on both cheeks, and went out. They heard him going down the five flights of stairs, two at a time.



THE RADIO WENT BACK TO MUSIC. LENA TURNED THE GAS ON AGAIN under the pot. Katya went back to the windowsill and did not take out her telephone.

From the window you could see the road to the refinery, and on it, already, a line of headlights. Orange jackets were coming out of every block in the microdistrict, walking fast, some running. At the refinery gate the floodlights came on all at once, white, though it was not yet dark.

"Babushka," said Katya, after a while, still looking out.

"What."

"What do they call it in Iradi? The ribbon."

Valentina thought.

"I don't know," she said. "I never asked." She turned the radio off. "You ask. You speak it."

Katya was quiet for a moment. Then she pulled her knees up and rested her chin on them, and said, to the window, to the flares, to the lines of men going down the road in the dusk, a word in Iradi that her grandmother did not understand. It was the only word she said, and she did not mix it with anything.

F O U R

Signatures

March 2007, Talas

THE YOUNG MAN FROM THE WRITERS' UNION CAME ON A TUESDAY, IN the afternoon, when the light in Gülsün's room is best and she is least likely to be asleep. He had a cardboard folder and a cake from the Altyn bakery, which told her that he had asked someone what she liked.

"Gülsün Apa," he said at the door, and bowed a little, the old way, with his hand on his chest. "You won't remember me."

"No," she agreed, and let him in.

He was perhaps thirty. He had the beard they all had now and spectacles with heavy frames, and he sat on the edge of her good chair as if it might report him. She made tea. He told her his name, which she forgot at once, and that he wrote poems, which she had expected, and that he had seen her as the mother in *Desert Sun's Rebellion* when he was a boy, which she had not.

"Everybody remembers me as somebody's mother," said Gülsün. "I was a girl once, you know. On that stage."

"I know, Apa. Bermet." He said it shyly, as if it were her real name. "My mother saw you. In the first production. She said she cried for a week."

"Everybody cried for a week," said Gülsün. "It was 1967. There was nothing else to do."



THE LETTER WAS TWO PAGES, TYPED. SHE READ IT WITHOUT HER glasses, holding it at arm's length, and then with them.

It was addressed to the government of the Democratic Republic in Talas and to the clan leaders of the Popular Front, together, as if they were the same kind of thing. It said that Talas was not a fortress but a city, with hospitals and schools and churches and a theatre and nearly a million people who had chosen neither side. It recalled the siege of 1992, the hunger and the shelling of the Old City. It asked both sides, in the name of everything Iradis held sacred, not to make the city a battlefield a second time. *Spare Talas*. It was signed by a list of names already twenty lines long: writers, actors, two composers, a painter, the rector of the Pedagogical Institute, a bishop's secretary, four priests.

Near the top, in a hand she knew from the dedication in her own copy of the novel, was *Kemel Ishakov*.

"He signed first," said the young man. "He asked to sign first. He said that at his age, if they shoot anyone, it might as well be him."

"That sounds like Kemel," said Gülsün.

She put the letter down on the table between the teacups.



SHE DID NOT SIGN IT THEN. SHE SAID SHE WOULD THINK, AND THE young man said of course, Apa, of course, and drank his tea too fast and burned his tongue and left the cake. She sat for a long time after he had gone, with the letter on the table, not looking at it.

It is not true, what the young say now, that in the old days everybody knew what would happen if you signed a letter. Nobody knew. That was the point. Sometimes nothing happened. Sometimes a man signed a letter in 1966 and nothing happened, and he signed

another in 1968 and the theatre found that it had no roles for him that season, or the next, and his son did not get the place at the Polytechnic, and his name stopped appearing in the newspaper, even in the lists of people who had attended things. Sometimes a man signed nothing at all and the same thing happened anyway. You could not calculate it. You could only decide what you could bear.

Gülsün had signed nothing in sixty-five years. She had been careful. She had been careful in 1967, when they cut the last scene of the play. She had been careful in 1986 and in 1991 and in 1992, when the shells were falling on the Old City and the actors of the Drama Theatre had slept in the costume store in the basement for nine weeks. She had been careful under the Americans, which was easy, because the Americans did not care what actresses thought.

She was sixty-five. Her husband was dead. Her son was in Yekaterinburg and telephoned on Sundays. She had a pension from the territorial administration that the new government in Talas had not yet decided whether to pay.

What could they take from her? She sat in her chair and tried to count, honestly, and it came to very little. That frightened her more than if it had come to a great deal.



AT NINE O'CLOCK THAT NIGHT SHE PUT ON HER COAT AND HER GOOD shoes and took the letter in her handbag and walked to the theatre.

It is not far. Nothing in the centre of Talas is far. The streets were empty and cold, and on Manas Avenue there was a police car parked across the road with its engine running, and the policemen inside looked at her and did not get out. She went in by the stage door, because she still had a key that no one had ever asked for back. Old Abylkasym, the night watchman, was asleep in his cubicle with his mouth open.

She did not turn on the stage lights. There was a working lamp at the side, a bare bulb in a cage, and she turned that on, and it lit about a third of the stage and none of the auditorium. Out there the seats went back into the dark, row after row, and she could feel them as you feel the cold from an open window.

She took her coat off and laid it on the boards. She stood where she had stood in 1967, a little left of centre, by the mark that was no longer there.



IN THE NOVEL, AND NOW IN THE PLAY, SINCE THEY RESTORED IT IN 1990, Bermet comes home alone at the end.

It is the spring of 1918. She has been to China and back across the glaciers. Her grandfather is buried on the far side of the passes, with nearly all the clan, in the snow. She is fourteen. She comes down out of the mountains above the Talas valley on foot, and at the top of the last pass, in the last chapter, she sees a rider on a white horse, standing very still on the ridge above her. He does not speak. He turns his horse and rides down ahead of her, and she follows him all the way home.

In 1967 they cut the rider. The censor said it was mysticism. The play ended at the top of the pass with Bermet alone, looking down at the valley, saying her grandfather's name. Gülsün had said that name on that stage two hundred and eleven times. She had never said the lines after it. She had learned them anyway, from the novel. Kemel had given her the uncut chapter in typescript in the dressing room, in 1967, folded in four, and told her to burn it, and she had not.

She stood in the light of the working lamp. Her knees hurt. Her voice, when it came, was not the voice of a girl of fourteen. It had not been that voice for forty years.

She said her grandfather's name. Then she said the lines after it, the ones that had been cut, to the dark seats, to nobody.

He is standing on the pass. His horse is white as milk. He does not look at me, and I am not afraid. He turns and goes down, and the stones do not move under the hooves, and I go down after him into my own valley, and the dogs of my own village bark at me as if I were a stranger, and I am not a stranger. I am the one who came home.

The seats said nothing. Somewhere in the building a pipe knocked.



OLD ABYLKASYM WAS AWAKE WHEN SHE CAME OUT. HE HAD HEARD her, of course, and had not come. He stood up in his cubicle and took his cap off.

"Gülsün Apa," he said. "It's late."

"It's late," she agreed.

She took the letter out of her handbag, unfolded it on his little shelf, beside the visitors' book that nobody signed, and asked him for a pen. He gave her his own, a cheap ballpoint chewed at the end. She signed below the last name on the list, carefully, in the Latin letters, the whole of her name, the way it had appeared on the posters.

Then she held the pen out to him.

He looked at it. He looked at the letter. He was seventy-two and had been the night watchman of the State Academic Drama Theatre since 1979, and in all that time no one had ever asked him for his opinion of anything.

"Me?"

"Why not you?" said Gülsün. "You live in Talas."

He took the pen. He signed under her name, slowly, in Cyrillic, because that was the alphabet he had learned. Then he looked at

what he had done for a long moment and laughed, once, quietly, like a man who has found a coin in an old coat.

She folded the letter and put it back in her handbag. She walked home through the empty streets. The police car was still on Manas Avenue with its engine running, and this time she raised her hand to the men inside as she passed, and after a moment, uncertainly, one of them raised his.

In April the Front surrounded the city. In June it came in. The theatre was not hit, though the windows on the street side were broken and the brass doors stolen. The letter, with sixty-three names on it, was printed in the *Talas Herald* on the thirtieth of March. Kemel Ishakov's name was at the top. At the bottom, the last two lines, which the typesetter thought were a mistake and nearly left out, were an actress who had played a girl in 1967 and the man who locked the theatre at night.

F I V E

Mother Leaven

April 2007, the Chatkal valley

THE LETTER FROM THE ARCHEPARCHY CAME UP THE VALLEY ON Leaven Thursday, in the saddlebag of the post rider, together with a sack of flour, two tins of lamp oil and a calendar for a year that was already a quarter gone.

Father Yuhanna Kalmurza uulu read it standing in the door of the yurt chapel, with his hands still white from the dough. It was short. It was addressed to all clergy of the archeparchy and the eparchies, and it said that the Church of Irad stood with no faction in the present troubles; that priests were to minister to all the faithful without distinction; and that no priest was to bless arms, banners or armed men, or to permit the holy things to be used to give the colour of the Church to any party. It was signed by the archbishop's own hand, which Father Yuhanna knew because the signature was crooked. The archbishop had arthritis.

He folded the letter and put it inside his cassock and went back to the dough.



THE MALKA OF THE UPPER CHATKAL HAD BEEN IN THE SAME POT FOR as long as anyone could say. It was a wooden pot, walnut, black with

age, its lid tied on with a thong, and it lived in a nest of white felt in a corner of the chapel yurt, and when the clan moved to the summer pastures it went on a white horse at the head of the line. The pot was not old. Pots break. Felt rots. Horses die. The leaven was old. Every Leaven Thursday, every Holy Thursday, the priest of the upper valley took a little of the old leaven and worked it into new dough, and let it rise, and kept a piece back, and the new piece became the old piece, and nothing had been lost.

The old women said it went back to Janyl's bread at the First Church. The Synod said that was a pious custom, not a doctrine. Father Yuhanna said nothing either way. He had been given the pot by the old priest of the valley in 1994, the year he was ordained, the old priest's hands shaking, and in thirteen years he had never let it go cold.

This year the dough rose slowly. The chapel yurt was cold. Half the men of the valley had gone north.



THEY HAD GONE IN MARCH, AFTER THE FRONT WAS FORMED: THE young men, and some not so young, on the mountain horses, with the old rifles from under the floors of the winter houses. Some had gone to cut the railway. Some to ring the garrisons on the Talas road. The rest were waiting in the summer camps, not yet summer, for word. The word, when it came, would come from the Talas Alatau, from the Tanıp, from Bektur, who everyone said was a careful man and would not waste them.

They had gone because of the pasture decrees. In January the government in Talas had issued papers that put the Chatkal summer pastures up for lease to companies. Nobody in the valley had heard of the companies. Then in February the other papers came out, from Nurzhan, the treaties, and the Chatkal was on those too, in a colour,

under a neighbouring country's name. After that nobody in the valley needed to be persuaded of anything.

Father Yuhanna's own nephew had gone. So had the son of the woman who kept the chapel felt clean, and both sons of the man who brought the milk for the Qurbana. On Sundays the chapel was full of women and old men and very small boys, and the singing was thinner, and higher, and he found he could not look at the empty place on the men's side without losing his line.



ON THE MORNING OF ST. GEWARGIS THE RIDERS CAME BACK DOWN.

St. Gewargis rides a white horse on the icons and kills a black dragon that some of the old people still call by another name. On his day, the twenty-third of April, every priest in the mountains blesses the horses before the spring migration. It is the oldest feast in the valley after Janyl's. The horses are brought to the chapel at dawn, washed, with white ribbons in their manes, and the priest walks down the line with water and milk and juniper smoke, and touches each horse on the forehead, and says its name.

That morning there were more horses than he had seen in years. The camps had emptied. The men who had gone north had sent word that the Front was moving on Talas, and the men who had been waiting had come down out of the camps in the night to be blessed before they went. There were a hundred and forty horses in the meadow below the chapel, and on most of them a man, and across the back of most of the men a rifle.

The headman of the upper valley, Ashyrbek, a cousin of his mother's, came to the door of the chapel yurt.

"Kashysh," he said. "We're ready."

Father Yuhanna stood in the doorway with the bowl of water in his hands. He could feel the letter inside his cassock, against his

chest, folded in four.

"Tell them to get down," he said.

"Kashysh—"

"Tell them to get down off the horses and take the rifles off their backs and lay them on the ground. Over there, by the wall of the sheepfold. Then I'll come down."

Ashyrbek looked at him for a long time. Then he turned and walked down the meadow, and Father Yuhanna watched him going from man to man, and watched the men turn their heads to look up at the chapel, and he did not move from the doorway.

It took a long time. Some of them argued. One young man from the lower camps rode away altogether, angrily, and did not come back. But in the end they got down, and the rifles went onto the grass by the sheepfold wall in a long untidy heap, like firewood, and the men stood at their horses' heads with nothing in their hands.

Then Father Yuhanna came down.



HE DID IT AS HE ALWAYS DID IT. WATER, THEN MILK, THEN SMOKE. He walked down the long line of horses, and dipped the branch of juniper in the bowl and shook it over each horse's head, and touched each horse on the forehead with his wet hand, and asked its name, and said it. *Ak-Boz. Kara-Too. Jeyren. Sur-Kök.* He blessed a hundred and thirty-nine horses that morning. He did not bless a single man. The men stood at the heads of their horses with their hands empty and their eyes on the ground, and when the water fell on the horses it fell on the men as well, of course, because water does, and he could not have prevented that if he had wanted to, and he did not try.

He did not look at the heap of rifles.

When he had finished, the men took the rifles back, quietly, each man looking for his own, and mounted, and the line began to move

off down the valley toward the north road. Father Yuhanna stood in the meadow with the empty bowl.

The last rider in the line was his nephew Temirbek.

He was nineteen. He had been at the Front's camps since March and had come down only for the night. He stopped his horse by the priest, and leaned down, and said, very low, so that no one would hear:

"Uncle. Give me some of the malka."

Father Yuhanna looked up at him.

"For the road," said Temirbek. "Mother says the leaven goes with a bride, it goes with a priest, it goes with the herd to the summer pastures. She says it goes where the people go. Well." He looked down the valley at the line of riders. "The people are going."



THE MALKA IS GIVEN. IT IS NEVER SOLD. IT IS GIVEN TO BRIDES, AND to new priests, and to the head of each family when the clan divides its herds. To lose it is a bad omen, the worst. It was not on the list in the archbishop's letter. The archbishop's letter said arms, banners and armed men. It did not say bread.

Father Yuhanna went back up to the chapel yurt. He lifted the walnut pot out of its nest of white felt, untied the thong, and took out the piece of new leaven, still soft from Thursday's dough. He broke off a pinch about the size of the top joint of his thumb and wrapped it in a square of clean white felt, and tied the felt with white thread, and carried it down to the meadow.

Temirbek put it inside his shirt, against his skin, where it would stay warm.

"Keep it alive," said Father Yuhanna. "Feed it flour and water. Don't let it freeze. When you come home, give it to your mother. Don't give it to anyone else."

"And if I don't come home?"

The priest put his hand on the horse's forehead, not the boy's.

"Then it's in the felt," he said. "Someone will find it. They'll know what it is."

Temirbek rode off after the others. Father Yuhanna stood in the meadow until the last of them had gone over the brow of the hill toward the north road and the sound of the hooves had stopped.

Then he went back up to the chapel, put the walnut pot back into its felt, tied the lid, and took the archbishop's letter out of his cassock. He smoothed it flat on the little table by the altar, under the lamp, and read it again from beginning to end. He was a careful man and did not wish to have misunderstood anything.

He had not. Arms, banners and armed men.

He folded the letter again and put it away. Then he washed his hands, which were still a little white from the flour, and went to say the morning office, alone, in the cold yurt, for the people who were going.



TEMIRBEK CAME HOME IN SEPTEMBER, AFTER THE CEASEFIRE, WITH A healed wound in his shoulder and a beard. He brought the felt with him. The leaven inside it had been fed on Front camp flour and the water of six rivers, and had gone sour twice and come back, and he gave it to his mother as he had been told. His mother keeps it still, in a pot of her own, in the lower Chatkal, on the tribal side of the line.

The priests of the Chatkal say that there are now two malkas in the upper valley where there was one. They say it in the way they say most things about the leaven, which is half as a joke, and half not.

S I X

The Aprons

April 2007 – November 2008, Semiz

THE LIST WENT UP ON THE DOOR OF THE COMMUNITY CENTRE ON THE twenty-fourth of April, two days after the Front closed the roads. It was in Spanish, and underneath in Iradi, in Mateo's mother's handwriting, because she had been asked to translate it and had sat up half the night at the kitchen table doing it, crossing out and starting again.

SuKarne will provide air transport for the wives and children of company employees. Departures from Talas Air Base, aprons 3 and 4. Bring passports. One suitcase per person.

Below that were the names. Mateo found his own a third of the way down: *Ortiz Alynkulov, Mateo, 11*. His mother's name was above it. His father's name was not there, because it was not a list for fathers.

He read it three times, with the other children pushing round him. Then he ran home to tell his mother, who already knew, because she had written it.

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THE PLANES WERE IRADIYA PLANES, WHITE, WITH THE AIRLINE'S NAME in blue along the side. They flew from the air base, a few kilometres west, where the Americans had been until December and where a few of them, people said, still were. From the roof of their block in Semiz you could see them come in low over the cattle yards, one every two or three hours, and go out again higher, heading south and west, toward Tashkent and then Istanbul and then, eventually, Mexico City and Culiacán.

His mother would not go.

"They're asking for women and children," said his father. "You're a woman. He's a child. What is there to discuss?"

"I'm a woman from here," said his mother. "This is my city. I'm not a Mexican wife."

"You are my wife, and I am Mexican."

"Then you get on the plane."

They argued in Spanish, which they did when it mattered, because his mother's Spanish was worse than his father's Iradi and she said it made her choose her words. Mateo sat on the stairs outside the kitchen door and listened. He was trilingual, like every child in the Colonia, and Russian besides, so there was nowhere they could hide from him.

"Rosa's going," said his father. "Lupita's going. Don Ramiro is sending Paty and the girls."

"Don Ramiro is from Durango."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything," said his mother. "They have somewhere to go."



HE WENT WITH HIS FATHER TO THE AIR BASE ON THE TWENTY-SIXTH TO see off the Hernández girls, who were his friends, and Paty, Don Ramiro's wife, who gave him tortillas when his mother was at school.

A SuKarne bus took them from the community centre, past the police post on the Trans-Talas Highway, where policemen or soldiers or someone looked in at the windows, through the base gate, and right out onto the concrete among the aeroplanes.

That was where Mateo learned the word *apron*.

It was a strange word for it, he thought, and he thought about it for a long time afterwards. An apron was what his grandmother wore in Culiacán when she made tamales. It was what his Iradi grandmother wore over her dress when she made boorsok. It was a thing women wore at the front of themselves to keep the mess off. Here it meant a huge field of grey concrete, flat to the mountains, with white lines painted on it and the aeroplanes standing in rows and the wind coming straight down off the Alatau. And here too it was full of women.

There were hundreds of them. Mexican women, and some Iradi women married to Mexicans, and some American women married to Mexican-Americans from Colorado, and their children, all standing in lines on the concrete with one suitcase each, being counted by men in SuKarne jackets with clipboards. The men who were not leaving stood behind a rope and watched. Nobody was crying very much. It was too windy, and too cold, and too strange.

Don Ramiro stood next to Mateo's father behind the rope. He was a big man with a grey moustache, who maintained the cold-store compressors at the plant and who kept a bay horse, Lucero, in a shed behind his house. Lucero was the only horse in the Colonia that was not a cattle horse. On Sundays Don Ramiro rode him round the edge of the feedlot fields, very slowly, in a hat, and the Iradi boys from the old blocks shouted *Kovboy!* at him, and he raised his hat to them as if they had cheered.

When Paty and the girls reached the steps of the plane, Paty turned round at the top and waved, and Don Ramiro took off his hat and held it against his chest and did not wave back.

"Why didn't you wave?" Mateo asked him in the bus.

"In Durango," said Don Ramiro, "if you wave at someone leaving, they don't come back."

"That's an Iradi thing," said Mateo. "My grandmother says that. About looking back."

Don Ramiro thought about this. "Then it's true twice," he said.



HIS MOTHER STAYED. MATEO STAYED WITH HER, BECAUSE SHE HELD his hand on the morning the last plane went and said, in Iradi, "You're mine too," and his father did not argue any more after that.

Four hundred men stayed in Semiz, and perhaps six hundred women and children who had not gone, or had nowhere to go, or were Iradi or Russian or Korean and had always lived there. In May the bread ran short in the city, then the petrol, then everything. SuKarne opened the cold stores and gave the beef away, on trucks, along the western road, to anyone who came. Old women who crossed the road rather than pass a cow ate that beef and did not say so.

At night the men of the Colonia walked the edges of the district in fours, with flashlights and sticks, and a few with the rifles that the plant security office had quietly unlocked. Mateo's father walked on Tuesdays and Fridays. Don Ramiro walked every night, on Lucero, slowly, round the outside of the fours, with his hat on.

"Why does he ride?" Mateo asked.

"Because from up there," said his father, "he can see over the walls."



ON THE NIGHT OF THE FOURTH OF JUNE THE FRONT CAME INTO TALAS, and people came out of the city to loot.

They came west along the highway in cars and on foot, past Semiz, toward the stores and the warehouses of the economic zone. Some of them turned off into the Colonia. The men of the night watch met them at the bottom of the main street, under the water tower, with their flashlights and their sticks. Mateo watched from the roof, which he had been forbidden to go onto, with his mother, who had forbidden it.

There was a lot of shouting. There were two shots, from somewhere, from the dark beyond the water tower. Nobody ever knew whose. The looters went back to the highway. The watch did not chase them.

In the morning they found Don Ramiro by the cattle-yard fence with a hole in his chest, and Lucero standing next to him, very still, with his reins hanging down and his saddle on.



THE *TALAS HERALD* LISTED HIM LATER, IN THE AUTUMN, WHEN IT printed the names: three residents of Semiz, one of them a Mexican maintenance engineer. Mateo cut out the list and kept it.

Paty did not come back. Most of the other women came back, after the ceasefire, on the same white planes, onto the same concrete. The girls came back, a year later, to sell the house. They gave Lucero to Mateo's father, because there was no one else, and because Mateo had been feeding him every day since June.



IN NOVEMBER 2008 THE PARISH OF ST. YUSUP THE WORKER DECIDED that the Day of the Dead would be done properly that year, for the

ones from 2007.

Mateo's mother was on the committee. So was Father Ignacio, the priest from Culiacán, and an old Iradi woman from the blocks named Apa Saliya, who had never had anything to do with the parish but came to every meeting and sat by the stove. It was Apa Saliya who said they should have a horse.

"For an Iradi rider who has died," she said, "the horse goes in front of the coffin, with no one on it, and the saddle turned backwards. So he can't ride it any more, and everyone can see that he can't."

"We don't have a coffin," said Father Ignacio. "It's a year later."

"You have a dead rider," said Apa Saliya. "And you have his horse."

So on the evening of the second of November Mateo walked at the front of the procession from St. Yusup to the cemetery, holding Lucero's bridle. Lucero had his saddle on backwards, the stirrups crossed over the seat. White ribbons were tied in his mane, which was the Iradi way, and orange marigolds from seeds sent from Sinaloa were plaited into his tail, which was not. Behind came the candles, and the photographs, and the priest, and the parish, and half the old blocks, and a good number of Iradis from the city who had read about it in the *Herald*. At the cemetery the Iradi wives of Mexican men poured milk on the graves alongside the tequila, and nobody told them not to.

Mateo did not look back at the procession. He kept his eyes on the road in front of him and on Lucero's empty saddle. But he could hear it behind him, all the way through the dark, singing in two languages, which is not the same thing as singing in neither.

At the cemetery gate Lucero stopped of his own accord and would not go further. Mateo stood with him. Father Ignacio said the prayers. When they were over, Mateo reached up and turned the saddle round the right way and tightened the girth.

"What are you doing?" said his mother.

"Taking him home," said Mateo. "It's finished."

Then he put his foot in the stirrup, as Don Ramiro had shown him on Sundays round the feedlot fields, and got up, and rode the bay horse slowly back down the road into the Colonia, past the water tower, under the lit windows of the blocks. He did not wave. Nobody waved at him. In Durango and in Talas, it is true twice.

S E V E N

Bread Cards

May 2007, Talas

THE STUDENT HAD BEEN WRITING ABOUT A DEAD LANGUAGE WHEN THE roads closed.

It was a dialect really, not a language. The professors were firm on this. Keñsuu, from a valley on the north slope of the Alatau, whose speakers had nearly all gone over the passes into China in 1916 and not come back. The last woman who spoke it properly had been recorded in 1959, and was long dead. What remained was a page and a half in the appendix of Abakirova's *Dialect Atlas*, a wax cylinder from 1928 of a man singing, and a word in the refrain of his song that nobody could translate.

The student's thesis was going to translate it. She had been sure of this in March.

In April she put the thesis in a drawer, because on the twenty-second the Popular Front rode down out of the mountains and closed the roads round Talas, and on the twenty-fourth the bakeries ran out of flour, and on the twenty-sixth Father Martin of St. Tomas opened the parish hall as a bread kitchen and asked for volunteers who could count.

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THE BREAD CARDS WERE HER IDEA. SHE WAS PROUD OF THAT, AND later ashamed of being proud.

At first they had simply handed the bread out at the side door of the parish hall to whoever was in the queue. By the third day the queue went round the block and down Kyzyl-Too Street to the tram depot, and the bread ran out by nine in the morning, and a man was knocked down and broke his wrist. So the student sat up one night at her mother's kitchen table with a ruler, a pair of scissors and a ream of yellow paper from the university's philology department, and made cards. One card per household, with the address written on it, and thirty-one squares, one for each day of May. A square was crossed out each time a loaf was given. She signed each card with her initials, because there was no stamp.

Father Martin looked at the first one for a long time.

"Ration cards," he said.

"Bread cards," said the student.

"My grandmother had ration cards. In the war. Leningrad." He was a Latin priest, an American, Polish on his father's side, who had come in 1996 to build the church with the American money and had stayed after the money stopped. He spoke Iradi with Polish vowels. "She kept one. In her Bible. After."

"These are only until the roads open."

"Yes," he said. "That's what they said in Leningrad," and he took the scissors and began to help her cut.



MAY WAS VERY BEAUTIFUL. IT IS ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL IN TALAS IN May. The poplars came out along the canals, and the apricots in the Old City gardens, and the snow went back up the Alatau day by day, and from the parish hall roof you could see the whole of it, very clear, the mountains so close in the cold mornings that you could

make out the dark patches of the juniper. And on the foothills, below the juniper, the smoke of the Front's fires.

She did not think about the fires during the day. During the day there was the bread. It came at five in the morning from the two bakeries still working, in the back of the parish van, which ran on diesel that Father Martin did not explain. There were three hundred and sixty loaves on a good day and two hundred on a bad one, and four hundred and eighty cards. The student did arithmetic. She did it on the backs of the cards and in the margins of a hymnbook and once, when there was nothing else, on her arm. Four hundred and eighty households. Two hundred loaves. Half a loaf per house, then, and the old and the families with babies first, and the young men last, and the young men did not like it, and said so.

She learned more about Talas that month than in twenty-two years of living there. She learned which families had money and were queuing anyway, and which had none and were too proud to queue, so that someone had to take their bread to the door after dark. She learned that the Russian woman on the third floor of number 14 was feeding a Kyrgyz family of seven in her flat. She learned that the Old City had a smell when it was hungry, and that it was not the smell of bread.



AT NIGHT THERE WAS NOTHING TO DO, AND THAT WAS WORSE.

The curfew began at nine. Her mother went to bed early and lay awake. The student lay awake too, in the narrow room that had been her brother's, with the window open, and listened to the city.

In a city under siege it is never quiet. There were dogs, more of them every week, because people let their dogs go when they could no longer feed them. There were generators. There were the police trucks, and later, toward the end, fewer police trucks. There was a

radio, somewhere across the courtyard, playing the same Mor-Wave tape every night until the batteries ran down, and then nothing, and then, a week later, the same tape again; someone had found batteries.

And, very late, when everything else had stopped, there was a sound from the hills that she could not at first identify. A low, uneven sound, like the sea, if the sea were made of something softer than water. It came and went with the wind.

It was horses. Thousands of them, in the foothill camps, moving in the dark, shifting their feet, blowing, the way horses do all night when there are many of them together. She had heard it before only once, on the Aksay Plateau as a child, at a summer gathering her uncle had taken her to, lying in a yurt in the middle of the camp with the felt wall a hand's width from her face.

Her uncle was out there now. Her mother's brother, Mamyrbek, from the Kara-Unkur valley above Arslanbob, who had ridden north in March with the Chubar. Her mother had had a message from him in April, by a road no one would name. *Tell my sister I am well. Tell her to keep bread in the house.* Since then, nothing.

The student lay in the dark and listened to the horses, and thought: one of those is his.



TOWARD THE END OF MAY THE BREAD GOT WORSE. THERE WAS CHAFF in it, and something else, maize flour or worse. Fewer people came to the side door, and those who came were thinner. A boy of ten came with a card that had been altered, the squares rubbed out and redrawn with a pencil, badly. The student saw it at once. She held it for a moment. Then she gave him the bread and crossed out a square and said nothing, and the next day she drew him a new card, with all the squares fresh, and signed it with her initials, and wrote his address on it from memory.

Father Martin saw her do it. He did not say anything either.

That night, the thirty-first, the last night of the squares, she did not go home at nine. She stayed in the parish hall because there was a meeting about June, about what would happen when the cards ran out, and the meeting went on until after the curfew. It was safer to sleep there. She lay on the floor of the hall on a pile of empty flour sacks, with the smell of flour and the dust of flour on everything, and she could not sleep.

She took out the thesis.

She had brought it from the drawer that week without knowing why. She turned the pages in the light from the street. Keñsuu. The song. The refrain word, *jümlöli*, which no one could translate. The man in 1928 singing it into the horn of a phonograph for a Russian ethnographer, twelve years after nearly everyone who had ever sung it with him had gone over the passes into China.

She had had theories, in March. It was a borrowing from Sogdian. It was an old word for a kind of bird. It was a nonsense syllable to fill the rhythm, as in the Russian *ai-lyuli*. She had cited three authorities for each theory and ruled out two of them.

Now she lay on the flour sacks and listened to the horses on the hills, the long soft sound like the sea, coming and going, and the thought came to her quite plainly, without authorities, that the singer had perhaps not known what the word meant either. That it was simply what you sang when you were waiting, on a cold night, for people who were out in the dark, and did not know if they would come back. That you did not need to know what it meant. You only needed to know the tune.

She did not write this down. It was not a thing you could put in a thesis.



SHE SLEPT A LITTLE, TOWARD MORNING. WHEN SHE WOKE IT WAS THE first of June, and there were no more squares on the cards.

Father Martin was standing at the side door of the hall, looking out at the street. There was already a queue. He had a new ream of yellow paper under his arm.

"June," he said, not turning round. "Thirty squares."

"Thirty," said the student. She got up off the sacks and brushed the flour off her skirt and went to find the scissors.

Three days later the Front came into the city. On that morning she was at the side door with the bread when the riders came down Kyzyl-Too Street, and she looked at every face that went by, every one, the whole length of the column. She did not see her uncle.

He came to her mother's door a week later, very thin, with a horse that was not his own. He did not want to talk about it. He sat in the kitchen and ate, slowly, a whole loaf of the bad bread with the chaff in it, and when he had finished he gathered up the crumbs from the table with the side of his hand and ate those too.

The student still has the yellow cards. She kept one of each month, May and June, in the back of her copy of the *Dialect Atlas*, at the page with the song.

E I G H T

The Armory

4 June 2007, Talas

THE KEY WAS ON A RING WITH TWO OTHERS: THE BOILER ROOM, AND A padlock on the yard gate that nobody had locked since the Americans left. It was a long key, old, brass, Soviet, with a square bit and the number 4 stamped into the bow. It opened a steel door in the basement of the municipal building on Manas Avenue, and behind the steel door there was a room with racks, and on the racks there were two hundred and twelve rifles, nine light machine guns and enough ammunition, the inventory said, to hold the government district for eleven days.

Sergeant Tolon Asanaliev had signed the inventory on the first of May. He had signed for the key too. It was in the left breast pocket of his uniform, buttoned down, and at a quarter past five on the morning of the fourth of June he could feel it there, against his chest, like a second heart that beat slower than his own.

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HE HEARD THEM BEFORE HE SAW THEM, LIKE EVERYBODY THAT morning.

He was on the roof of the municipal building with Corporal Nazarov and a radio that did not work. The sky over the Alatau was

going grey. The city below was dark, because the power station had stopped on the second, and quiet, because there was nothing left to make a noise with. And from the east, from the direction of the Old City and the Kara-Oi road, there came a sound that he felt in the soles of his feet before he heard it: a deep, uneven drumming that grew and grew and did not stop.

"What is that?" said Nazarov. He was from Nurzhan. He had never lived anywhere with horses.

Tolon had grown up in Kara-Bulak, in the Talas valley, where the Kenkol road comes down. His grandfather had kept horses. He knew the sound. It was the sound of the bayge at the end of the summer, all the riders coming at once down the long field. But it was a hundred times bigger, and it was coming down Manas Avenue.

"Horses," he said.



BY SIX THE RIDERS WERE IN THE OLD CITY. BY HALF PAST SIX THEY were at the Bazar-i Kalan, and the police in the bazaar station had come out with their hands up and been told to go home, and had gone. By seven the radio, which suddenly worked, was full of voices: police stations surrendering, ministers missing, somebody shouting the same call sign over and over and getting no answer.

The major came up onto the roof at five past seven.

Tolon had served under him for two years. He was a quiet man, from the north of the valley, with a mother who was Tanip and a father who was nobody in particular. He had been in the siege of 1992 as a boy of twenty-one, and he did not talk about it. He did not drink with the men. He was the only officer in the battalion whom Tolon had never heard raise his voice.

He did not raise it now.

"Sergeant," he said. "Get the men off the walls. All of them. Into the courtyard. No one fires."

Tolon looked at him.

"Sir, the government district—"

"There is no government district," said the major. "The Prime Minister is at his residence. Ministers are not at their ministries. There is nobody in Legislative Hall except the cleaners. I have spoken to the commander of the column coming down Manas Avenue. I have known him for fifteen years. He has given me his word. We stand down, nobody fires, nobody is hurt." He paused. "Get the men off the walls."

Tolon went down and got the men off the walls.



THEY STOOD IN THE COURTYARD OF THE MUNICIPAL BUILDING, FORTY-one gendarmes in a ragged square, with their rifles slung, while the sound of the horses got louder. Some of the men were from Talas and looked at the gate with something that was not fear. Some of the men were from Nurzhan and from the Chu and looked at the gate with something that was. Nazarov stood next to Tolon, and his face had gone the colour of the courtyard concrete.

The major came down the steps. He stood in front of them and spoke briefly. He said what he had said on the roof. He said that this was a city, not a fortress. He said that the men coming down the street were Iradis, and so were they. He said that any man who wished to leave could leave now, by the back gate, with his rifle, and go home, and no one would stop him or write down his name. Six men left. Nazarov did not. Tolon did not.

Then the major turned to him.

"Sergeant Asanaliev. You have the key to number four."

"Yes, sir."

"Give it to me."

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AFTERWARDS, A LONG TIME AFTERWARDS, THERE WERE TWO STORIES.

In the first story, which is told in the valleys and sung sometimes at weddings by bards who have never been to Talas, the major opened the armory himself, with his own hands, and stood aside, and the Front's riders came down the basement stairs and took the rifles, and with those rifles the government district fell by noon without a shot, and the major rode out of the city with the Front that summer and has lived in the mountains ever since, and is a hero.

In the second story, which is the one in the ISEZ history textbook for the ninth class, an officer of the Republican Gendarmerie deserted his post in the face of armed insurgents and handed over state weapons to them, in violation of his oath, and there is a warrant out for his arrest.

In neither story is there a sergeant.

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WHAT HAPPENED WAS THIS. TOLON STOOD IN THE COURTYARD WITH the key against his chest, and the major held out his hand, and the sound of the horses was at the end of the street now, so loud that the windows of the municipal building were humming in their frames.

Tolon did not move.

He was not thinking about the government, or the Front, or the Bill of Sale, or the Prime Minister at his residence, or any of the things that the newspapers wrote about for years afterwards. He was thinking about the inventory. He had signed it. Two hundred and twelve rifles, nine light machine guns. His name was on the bottom of the page, in blue ink, with the date. Whatever happened to those

rifles, from now until the end of the world, his name was on the bottom of the page.

"Sergeant," said the major, quietly.

"Sir," said Tolon. "I signed for them."

The major looked at him. Then something happened to his face that Tolon had not seen before and never saw again: a kind of tiredness that came all at once and went straight through him, as if he had been carrying something heavy up a long staircase and had only just noticed.

"I know," said the major. "So did I. Everybody signed for something." He did not lower his hand. "Give me the key, or open the door yourself. Those are the choices. There isn't a third one this morning."

The gate of the courtyard opened. The first riders came in.



TOLON UNBUTTONED HIS POCKET. HE TOOK OUT THE KEY RING, WITH the boiler room and the yard gate and the long brass key with the 4 on it.

He did not give it to the major.

He walked across the courtyard, past the riders, who were mostly very young and very dusty and sitting their horses as if they had been born on them, which most of them had. Then down the steps to the basement, along the corridor, past the boiler room, to the steel door with the number 4 painted on it in white. The major followed him. So did two of the riders, on foot now, with their rifles in their hands.

He put the key in the lock.

He stood like that for what he thinks now was a very long time, and what the major, if anyone ever asked him, would probably say was three or four seconds. He had his hand on the key. The lock was

old and stiff and turned either way. One way it locked twice, a deadbolt, and the key could be snapped off in it, and no one would get that door open without a cutting torch, and there was no cutting torch in Talas with any fuel in it. The other way it opened.

He turned the key.



TOLON ASANALIEV STILL LIVES IN TALAS. HE LEFT THE GENDARMERIE in the autumn of 2007, before the new administration got round to the question of who had been where on the fourth of June. He drives a minibus on the number 9 route, from the Bazar-i Kalan to the airport road. His son is nineteen and is studying engineering at the Polytechnic in Nurzhan, and the son has read both stories, the one from the valleys and the one from the ninth-class textbook, and has asked his father more than once which way he turned the key.

Tolon tells him to ask the major.

The major is in the mountains, and there is a warrant out for him, and nobody can ask him anything. And the brass key with the 4 on it, which should have been handed in and was not, is in a tin box on the top shelf of the wardrobe in Tolon's flat, with his discharge papers and his father's medals, where his son has seen it many times and has never once picked it up.

N I N E

Bazaar Chubar

August – October 2007, Bazar-Korgon

THE SACK CAME DOWN FROM ARSLANBOB IN THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST, on the back of an apricot truck. The driver called from the gate that it was from Kuchkar *aka*, from the kuda, for the bride, and drove on.

Walnuts. They had fallen a month early and still wore their green coats. Zuhra sat in the shade of the warehouse with a basin and a knife and husked them, as she had done every autumn since she could hold a knife, and laid the pale shells out on the roof to dry. Only when she came down the ladder did she see her hands. Black to the wrist. Walnut juice goes in under the skin and stays for ten days, whatever you do.

Her grandmother saw them from the bench under the vine.

“Six weeks to the toi,” said Kumushay, “and you’ve dipped your hands in Morkhan’s ink.”

She brought a bowl of sour milk and held Zuhra’s wrists down in it and said a prayer in the church words of Örüktü, the hamlet in the hills where she had been born a Christian, before she came down to the bazaar in 1961 to marry a Muslim walnut buyer. The milk did nothing. They both knew it would do nothing. Zuhra kept her hands in it until the sun went off the yard, because her grandmother’s hands on her wrists were warm.

The kuda had been made in May, with the walnut trees in flower. Her father had driven them up the valley road past the old police post at the bridge, where one bored policeman had sat since Soviet times, and in Kuchkar's yard, under a walnut tree so old its trunk was bound with an iron band, the men had settled the kalym: a grey riding mare, eleven sheep, four hundred dollars. Kuchkar's son Alisher had walked her to the falls, his little sister following a few steps behind and watching the birds.

"Your father buys our walnuts for half what they're worth," he had said, not looking at her.

"Two-thirds," she had said.

He had laughed then, and looked at her. "Well. Now it's in the family."

That was in May. In May everyone on the valley road, high and low, cursed Orozbekov and his ministers, who had tried to sell the Fergana rim to Tashkent on a piece of paper. In May it was one valley.



THE ELDERS MET ON THE THIRD SUNDAY OF AUGUST, MARKET DAY, IN the room above the *chaikhana* at the head of the walnut rows. Her father told her to carry the tea up. He said it in a voice she had not heard from him before, and she understood that he wanted her in the room and did not want to say why.

Abdumalik Mamadaliev spoke first, because he always did. The Front had gone back to the hills, he said, as the clans always do: they come down, break what needs breaking, and go home. Good. But the Front was not at the bridge. The Uzbek frontier was four kilometres away, and the men on the other side had read the same papers as everyone else. In Tash-Kömür there was now a government, the one that had read the papers out and stopped the sale, and it had a

Gendarmerie, and trucks, and a road. They would come if they were asked.

"Asked by whom?" said Rahmatulla the honey seller, who had a brother in Kyzyl-Unkur.

"By this room."

"This room is half the clan."

"This room," said Mamadaliev, "is the half that lives here."

They talked for three hours, as it is done. At the end Rahmatulla said, "They'll call us bazaar Chubar up there. The ones who sold the hills for a road."

"Let them," said Mamadaliev. "They'll still bring their walnuts down to sell to us."

Nobody laughed, because it was true.

Elders don't vote. Mamadaliev went round the room for the sense of it. Each man said yes, or said nothing, which counted as yes. Rahmatulla said no. When it came to her father, Abdukadyr, who on the shop sign and in the ledgers was Yusupov and on the felt in Kuchkar's house was Yusup uulu, he lifted his eyes from the carpet and looked at his daughter kneeling by the samovar.

She was filling an old man's bowl. She did not look up.

"Yes," said her father.



THE TRUCKS CAME ON THE THURSDAY, SIX OF THEM, OLIVE-DRAB, along the foot of the hills from Tash-Kömür. Some people clapped. A woman from the dried-fruit rows held up a round of bread to a gendarme in the back of a truck, and he touched it to his forehead. Zuhra watched from the warehouse roof with her grandmother, who had climbed the ladder in spite of her hip.

"Jandarm," said Kumushay, as you would name a disease.

"They came because we asked them."

"Yes," said her grandmother. "That's the worst way for them to come."

By the end of the week there was a barrier at the bridge, a painted pole on an oil drum, and a hut of sandbags, and young men from Talas writing down the names of every man who went up the valley. Above the bridge, at the bend where the orchards began, riders from the upper valley sat under a walnut tree with rifles across their backs. Between the pole and the bend lay four hundred metres of empty road.

The highland elders met at the shrine of Arslanbob-Ata and refused. Alisher said so on the telephone, from the only place on his roof where the signal reached. They had sent a message with the refusal: *The lowland always sold the hills' walnuts. Now it has sold the hills.*

"My father says a daughter-in-law comes up," Alisher said. "The bazaar stays down."

"And you?"

"I say it's the same road. It was the same road last month."

The line went dead.

No walnuts came down that September. The loads stopped at the riders' bend. In Bishkek the two sides signed a ceasefire, and the radio read out the terms: a demarcation line, and a zone twelve kilometres deep on each side where no one could bring a tank or a cannon. In the south, the newsreader said, the line would follow the foot of the hills.

"Then this house is in it," said Kumushay, counting on her fingers. "And Kuchkar's house. So nobody can bring a cannon to the wedding."

Her mother laughed and covered her mouth. Her father did not laugh.

The wedding was set for the fifth of October.



KUCHKAR CAME DOWN ONCE, ON HIS HORSE, IN DAYLIGHT. THE gendarmes kept him at the pole for three hours while they radioed Tash-Kömür about his expired Soviet passport. Her father went down, and was not allowed through either, so the two men stood with the pole between them and talked in the heat. *Let the toi be held below*, said her father. *My son is not a bazaar man*, said Kuchkar. Then their voices rose, and the boy from Talas put a hand on his rifle strap, not knowing what else to do with it, and both old men fell silent.

At last Kuchkar said that the grey mare was his father's horse's granddaughter, and he hoped she was being fed.

"Better than any of us," said her father.

Kuchkar rode back up the empty road, and that was all.

That night Zuhra found her father in the warehouse among the half-empty sacks, the ledger open on his knee and nothing written in it.

"You looked at me," she said. "In the *chaikhana*. Before you said yes."

"I was asking you."

"You didn't ask anything."

"I asked with my face. You were filling the teapot."

"What would you have done if I'd looked up?"

He was quiet for a long time. "The same. I wanted you to see me say it." He closed the ledger. "If you go up, I can't come. Not to the toi. Not after. They have my name at the pole, and up there I'm the man who said yes. I won't stand at the edge of my daughter's wedding like a debt collector."

"Then I won't go."

"You'll go. I chose for the bazaar. I won't choose for you." He stood up, and his knees cracked. "Your grandmother's father walked her as far as the bridge, because that's where his land ended. Now

it's where mine ends. So I'll walk you to the bridge. Every family has its bridge."



ON THE MORNING OF THE FIFTH IT RAINED BEFORE DAWN AND THEN cleared, and the hills above the bridge came out so sharp you could count the yellow walnut trees on the slopes. Her hands were almost clean. A shadow of brown remained in the creases of her knuckles. Her grandmother turned them over, said nothing, and kissed the back of each.

Half the bazaar was at the bridge. Mamadaliev put his heavy hand on her head for a moment, said the *bata* — *may your hearth be warm, may your road be open* — and stepped back before anyone could see his face.

The gendarme captain was polite and had a clipboard. He asked her name and wrote it the way the forms from Tash-Kömür told him to: *Yusupova, Zuhra Abdukadyrovna*. He turned the clipboard round so she could check the spelling. It was the name on her school certificates and in the shop ledger, and she had never once said it aloud.

"That's right," she said.

He lifted the pole himself. Her mother went under it with the bread, then her grandmother with her stick, then the cousins carrying the chest and the rolled felts of the dowry. Her father stood beside the sandbag hut in his grey suit and did not come forward. On the far side of the pole Zuhra turned. He nodded once, as a trader nods across the walnut rows when the price is agreed and there is nothing more to say. She nodded back the same way, because she had learned it from him.

Halfway up the empty road her grandmother stopped.

"About here," said Kumushay. "This is where my father stood." She looked back at the pole, and up at the riders. "Now it's nobody's. That's new."

At the bend a grey-bearded man, one of Kuchkar's brothers, had a school exercise book open on a stone. If the Gendarmerie wrote down names, the elders had decided, then so would the riders. He did not ask her name. He wrote it in round Latin letters, *Zuhra Abdukadyr kyzy*, and turned the book round so she could check it.

"That's right," she said.

Alisher stood holding a white horse hung with red and white tassels. They lifted her onto it, the women began the song that goes up the valley ahead of a bride, and Alisher took the bridle.

A bride does not look back at the house she is leaving, or she will be homesick all her life.

She looked back. Her father was still beside the pole, small and grey, the bazaar behind him and somewhere beyond the haze the Uzbek frontier. He would not move until the bend took her out of sight. Then he would cross the bridge and open the shop, because a few walnuts were coming down at night by the paths below Kyzyl-Unkur, and someone had to buy them.

Twelve kilometres up, twelve kilometres down, the agreement said. It had sounded like a great distance.

It was four hundred metres. She could still see his face.

T E N

One to One Hundred Thousand

September 2007, Bishkek

THE MAPS HAD BEEN PRINTED IN 1983 BY THE MAIN ADMINISTRATION of Geodesy and Cartography of the USSR Council of Ministers, and stamped *secret* in the top right-hand corner, and then, at some point in the 1990s, stamped again *declassified* in a different ink. They were the best maps anyone had. They were the only maps both sides would accept, because they had been made by neither.

Major Daniyar Kudashev had forty-one sheets to get through. On the morning of the ninth of September he was on sheet thirty-four, and it had taken three days.

THE TALKS WERE HELD IN A CONFERENCE HOTEL ON THE SOUTHERN edge of Bishkek, among apple orchards, with a view of the Ala-Too. The political delegations met upstairs, in the large hall with the flags. Bektur Zhumabek uulu sat at one end of the long table for the Front, and the man from Toktarov's office sat at the other, and the Kazakh, Uzbek and Kyrgyz observers sat along the sides and wrote everything down and said almost nothing, each one careful, every morning, to put on the record that his presence did not affect his

government's claim. The UN mediators went up and down the room like waiters.

The military track met downstairs, in a room that had been a restaurant. The tables had been pushed together into one long table and covered with green baize, and on the baize lay the maps.

There were four of them on each side. Kudashev for the administration, with a captain from the Gendarmerie and two men from the new State Defence Corps who did not know how to read a contour line. For the Front, three clan commanders and a man named Kaimbek Ashyraly uulu, who had been a lieutenant of engineers in the territorial defence force until March of that year and had then gone up into the mountains with his whole company and his whole company's trucks.

In 1992 Kudashev and Kaimbek had dug trenches together in the snow outside Kobozev, under the same captain, eating from the same pot. Neither of them mentioned this on the first day. On the second day Kaimbek said, as they sat down, "Your hands still shake," and Kudashev said, "Yours still don't," and that was the only time either of them mentioned it.



THE RULE WAS SIMPLE, AND THE UN MAN HAD WRITTEN IT ON A whiteboard on the first morning: *The line shall follow the positions held by the forces of each party at 00:00 hours on 1 September 2007.* Each side had brought its own record of where its men had been at midnight on the first. Where the records agreed, a line was drawn. Where they disagreed, the two sides argued, and then a line was drawn.

It was drawn with a pencil. A Koh-i-Noor, grade 4H, very hard, sharpened to a point with a razor blade. The UN man had insisted on the hardest pencil in Bishkek, so that the line would be fine and leave no room for argument.

On the first day Kudashev had done the arithmetic, because he was an engineer by training and could not help it. At one to one hundred thousand, one millimetre on the map is one hundred metres on the ground. The finest 4H line, drawn carefully on good paper, is about a fifth of a millimetre wide.

Twenty metres. Every line they drew was twenty metres wide on the ground, and nobody would ever know which side of those twenty metres it ran.

On the second day he redid the arithmetic, because the pencil was blunter than he had thought. Forty metres.



SHEET THIRTY-FOUR COVERED A STRETCH OF THE TALAS VALLEY foothills where the plain runs up into the first folds of the Alatau, on the Kenkol fan. It showed a scatter of winter houses, a stream, two tracks, and a hamlet with eleven buildings marked in black, named on the map in Russian letters *Dzhar-Bash. Jar-Bash*. Head of the gully.

The records agreed about almost all of it. The Gendarmerie had held the plain. The Front had held the hills. Between them, at midnight on the first of September, there had been about a kilometre of ground that nobody had held, and the line would run through the middle of it. Kudashev drew it, lightly, in pencil, and Kaimbek watched him draw it and nodded, and the UN man initialled the corner of the sheet.

Then Kaimbek put his finger on the map, a little above the line, and said: "That's a spring."

There was a blue circle on the map, very small, with a blue thread running down from it to the stream. Beside it, in the tiny italic of Soviet cartographers, it said *rodn*. For *rodnik*. Spring.

"It's on your side," said Kudashev.

"It's on our side," Kaimbek agreed. "And that"—he moved his finger, a millimetre, below the line—"is the graveyard."

Kudashev looked. Below the line, on the administration's side, was a small rectangle with a cross-hatch in it, the Soviet sign for a cemetery. It was perhaps three hundred metres from the spring.

"Jar-Bash buries its dead below the spring," said Kaimbek. "It always has. They carry the body down from the village, past the spring, and they stop at the spring and wash their hands, and then they go down to the graves. Then they come back up past the spring and wash again. That's how it's done there." He took his finger off the map. "With your line, the spring is ours and the graves are yours. So now a family from Jar-Bash will wash their hands on our side, and cross your checkpoint with the body, and bury their father in the Special Economic Zone, and cross back, and wash again on our side. And at your checkpoint someone will want to see the dead man's passport."

One of the Defence Corps men laughed. Nobody else did.

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THEY ARGUED ABOUT IT FOR MOST OF THE MORNING. NOT ANGRILY. Kudashev had been in angry rooms, and this was not one. It was more like two old carpenters arguing about a joint.

If they moved the line down, below the graveyard, the administration lost a strip of pasture and a track that its patrols used. If they moved it up, above the spring, the Front lost the spring, and the village would have to come down to the administration's side for water. They could make a loop. The line could bend down around the graveyard like a finger, and leave it on the Front's side. But then it would be a salient, and salients have to be watched, and a salient around a graveyard would be watched by two sets of men with rifles, all the time, over the dead.

At twelve they broke for lunch. Kudashev did not eat. He went out into the hotel orchard and smoked, which he had stopped doing in 1995, with a cigarette bummed from the Kazakh observer's driver. The apples were ripe. Wasps were working the fallen ones in the long grass.

Kaimbek came out after a while and stood next to him and did not smoke.

"You know Jar-Bash?" said Kudashev.

"My wife's mother is buried there."

Kudashev nodded. He had thought it would be something like that.

"In 1992," said Kaimbek, looking at the mountains, "outside Kobozev, there was that boy from Talas. The one with the accordion. You remember?"

"Erik."

"Erik." Kaimbek nodded. "We buried him where he fell. There was no time. We marked it with his rifle. Afterwards, when it was over, his mother came out from Talas to find him, and nobody could find the place. The ground was all dug over. All the snow had melted." He was quiet for a moment. "She walked up and down that field for three days."

Kudashev finished the cigarette.

"I'm not moving the line," he said. "I can't. I have instructions. Every metre is a metre."

"I know."

"But I'm an engineer. I can draw badly."

Kaimbek turned his head and looked at him.



AFTER LUNCH THEY WENT BACK TO SHEET THIRTY-FOUR. KUDASHEV took the 4H pencil from the UN man's tray, looked at it, and put it

back. He took his own pencil out of his breast pocket instead, an ordinary HB from a stationery stall in the Osh bazaar, a soft one, with a worn point, and he redrew the line through the kilometre of no man's land below Jar-Bash.

He drew it carefully, the way he had been taught at the institute in 1988, with the pencil held upright and the paper turned to meet it. Where the line passed between the spring and the graveyard it went soft and grey and a little thick, as soft pencil does on paper, about as wide as the blue thread of the stream.

The UN man leaned over and looked at it for a long time.

"That's not very precise, Major," he said.

"No," said Kudashev. "Soviet paper. It takes the graphite badly."

The UN man looked at Kaimbek. Kaimbek looked at the map. Then the UN man shrugged, the shrug of a man with seven more sheets to get through before the political delegations met at five, and initialled the corner.

On the ground, a soft HB line at one to one hundred thousand is about a hundred metres wide. It is wide enough for a spring, a path and a graveyard, and for a family carrying a body down from a village to walk the whole way without coming out of the line at either side.



WHEN THE JOINT SURVEY TEAMS CAME TO MARK THE LINE ON THE ground, in the summer of 2009, they reached sheet thirty-four in July. They found the pencil line on the map, soft and grey between the spring and the graves, and argued about it for a day, and in the end set no pillar there at all, and wrote in their report *Line indeterminate on source map, to be referred to the Joint Liaison Committee*. The Joint Liaison Committee meets monthly at Kara-Oi. It has not yet reached Jar-Bash.

Kudashev retired from the State Defence Corps in 2013 as a lieutenant colonel. Kaimbek Ashyraly uulu still lives in the hills above the Talas valley, and is said to be a judge of the clan court there. They have not met again.

The families of Jar-Bash still bury their dead below the spring, and wash their hands on the way down, and wash them again on the way back, and nobody asks them for any passports at all.

E L E V E N

Switchyard

Winter 2008–09, the Toktogul dam

FROM THE EL-CHORO POST ON THE CREST OF THE DAM YOU COULD SEE three things: the reservoir behind, the gorge in front, and the switchyard below.

The reservoir was a long grey lake between brown mountains, and that winter it was lower than anyone had ever seen it. The water had gone down and down all through the dry autumn, leaving a wide bare shore of mud and stones the colour of ash. Under the water, and now under the mud, lay the old floor of the Toktogul valley, where the Kōkjal had kept their winter camps until 1974. Asylbek Jumagul uulu's grandfather had been born down there. When the water dropped, the old people of OZGÖRÜSH walked out across the mud to look for the foundations of their houses, and some of them found them.

The gorge went down from the dam toward the Fergana valley, narrow, very deep, with the river at the bottom white even in January.

And at the foot of the dam, on a ledge blasted out of the gorge wall, was the switchyard: a fenced field of steel towers, transformers, insulators and humming wire, where the power from the turbines was gathered up and sent away down the lines to the cities. The Gendarmerie held the switchyard. The El-Choro held the dam. The

ceasefire agreement, which Asylbek had never read, apparently said that this was a temporary arrangement under international supervision. It had been temporary for sixteen months.



THERE WERE SIX RIDERS AT THE POST ON THE CREST, TWO AT A TIME IN eight-hour watches, with a yurt for sleeping and a concrete hut that had been an inspection office. Asylbek had the night watch in January and February because he was twenty-six and unmarried and his name had been drawn. He did not mind the dark. He minded the cold, which came up off the reservoir ice at night and went through felt and sheepskin as if they were paper.

Below, in the switchyard, the Gendarmerie had a post too: a white cabin by the gate, with a light in the window and a stovepipe, and a searchlight on a pole that they turned on and off at intervals for no reason he could understand. At night there were usually two of them.

One of them watched him.

Asylbek did not know his name. He was young, thin, with a Russian fur hat with the flaps down, and he had binoculars, and every night at some point he came out of the cabin and stood by the fence and raised the binoculars and looked up the face of the dam at the El-Choro post. For a long time. Then he went back in.

The first time, Asylbek put his hand on his rifle. The third time, he raised his own binoculars, an old Soviet pair that had been his uncle's, and looked back. He could see the boy quite clearly in the light from the cabin: a long nose, red with cold; a cigarette; a face that was bored, and young, and very tired.

They looked at each other through the binoculars for perhaps a minute. Then the boy lowered his, and lifted a hand, and went inside.



THE POWER CUTS BEGAN IN THE CITIES IN DECEMBER. ASYLBK HEARD about them on the radio, on the Talas stations that still came through at night: rationing in Talas, four hours a day; rationing in Nurzhan; schools closed; old people dying in the cold in the blocks. The radio said it was the tribal side's fault, because the tribal side held the dam and was stealing the water. The radio from the other side, from the camps, said it was the cities' fault, because they had drained the reservoir all summer selling power to Kazakhstan and now there was none left. The UN engineers who came up once a month in a white Land Cruiser said it was the drought, and the glaciers, and the old turbines, and a great many other things, and that they would put it in their report.

Asylbek knew only that the water was low and the boy in the switchyard was cold.

In the second week of January the boy's cabin lost its power.

It was a joke, in a way. He was sitting in the middle of one of the biggest switchyards in Central Asia, among wires carrying enough electricity for half a country, and his own cabin had no light. Something to do with the rationing, or a fuse, or an order from somebody in Tash-Kömür. The window went dark. The searchlight stopped. The stovepipe kept smoking, so they still had wood, but the cabin was black at night, a black box at the foot of the white dam, and the boy no longer came out with his binoculars.

On the third night Asylbek took the paraffin lamp from the inspection hut, lit it, and set it on the parapet of the dam, at the place directly above the cabin, where it could be seen from below.

He did not know why he did it. He told the others afterwards that it was so that the gendarmes could see the El-Choro were watching. This was partly true.

At about two in the morning the cabin door opened. The boy came out and stood by the fence and looked up at the lamp for a long time. Then he raised his hand.



AFTER THAT THE LAMP WENT ON THE PARAPET EVERY NIGHT, AND every night, at some point, the boy came out and raised his hand.

In February the boy left something by the fence. Asylbek saw him do it through the binoculars: a small packet, wedged into the wire mesh at the corner of the switchyard where the service track came up to the foot of the dam. The track was in neither side's ground, or both. Asylbek walked down it at dawn, slowly, with his rifle slung behind him and his hands where they could be seen. In the packet was a carton of cigarettes, American, the good kind they sold on the air base, and nothing else. No note.

He took it. The next night he left something in the same place: a round of *kurut*, the hard dried yoghurt his mother made, wrapped in a cloth, and a handful of dried apricots from Ozgörüsh.

They never spoke. They never came down to the fence at the same time. They left things in the wire, at dawn, at dusk, for six weeks: cigarettes, *kurut*, a tin of Russian condensed milk, a pair of wool socks from the Ozgörüsh market, a newspaper from Talas so old it was nearly history, a sheepskin hat with flaps, better than the Russian fur one; in the last week, from the boy, the Russian fur hat itself, as if in exchange; and once a bar of Mexican chocolate with chilli in it that Asylbek did not like at all and ate anyway.



IN MARCH A HORSE CAME DOWN THE GORGE.

It was an El-Choro horse, a young grey mare belonging to a Kökjal family camped in the hills above the reservoir. She had broken her tether in a storm and wandered for two days and come down the service track in the night, and in the morning she was inside the switchyard. She had got in through a gap in the fence where the

snow had brought down a post, and she was standing among the transformers, eating the dry grass between the concrete footings, with forty thousand volts over her head.

From the crest of the dam Asylbek watched the gendarmes come out of the cabin. There were three of them that morning. One of them had a rifle and raised it, not at the mare, at the dam, at the El-Choro post, because a horse from the tribal side was inside the switchyard and nobody had a rule for that. Asylbek's partner on the watch put his own rifle up. For a moment everything on the face of the dam was very still.

Then the thin boy pushed the gendarme's rifle down with the flat of his hand.

He said something. He went back into the cabin, came out with a length of rope, and walked slowly through the transformers to the grey mare, talking to her. Asylbek could not hear the words. He could see the boy's breath. The mare lifted her head and looked at him and did not run. He put the rope round her neck and led her, at a walk, back out through the gap in the fence and up the service track to the corner where they left the packets. There he tied the rope to the wire, loosely, with a bow, the way you tie a horse you mean somebody else to untie. He went back to the cabin without looking up.

Asylbek walked down and untied her. She was cold and frightened and not hurt. He led her up the track, across the crest of the dam, and up into the hills, and gave her back to the family, and told them she had come back on her own.



IN JULY THE KURULTAI ON THE AKSAY PLATEAU APPROVED THE Toktogul protocol. The K kjal stood aside: they would not lay the whip against it, but they would not give their consent to it either,

because it did not give them back their valley. The line moved. The dam, the reservoir, the town of Toktogul and the gorge passed to the Special Economic Zone. The El-Choro rode away from the crest of the dam on the morning of the twentieth of July, in a column, with the old men of Ozgörüsh standing at the roadside, and a Gendarmerie company drove up from Tash-Kömür the same afternoon and took over the inspection hut.

Asylbek left the paraffin lamp on the parapet when he went. It was not lit. He left it at the place directly above the cabin.

He never knew the boy's name. He has thought of finding out, since. He could ask; there are people at the crossings who know people. But he has thought about it and decided that if he knew the name he would have to know other things too: where the boy was from, and what he thought about the Kökjal and the valley under the water, and whether he was the one who wrote in the Gendarmerie logbook for those six weeks, every night, *nothing to report*.

He would rather not. He has a Russian fur hat with the flaps worn thin that a gendarme left in the wire at the foot of the Toktogul dam in the winter of 2009. It is worse than any hat he could buy. He wears it every winter in the hills above the reservoir, when he goes out across the ice to his family's old ground in the years the water is low.

T W E L V E

Pillar

March 2009, the Kenkol valley

VERA KIM SPOKE FOUR LANGUAGES, AND IN THE KENKOL VALLEY IN March 2009 she was paid to speak all of them at once.

Russian to the Gendarmerie surveyor, Captain Lukin, who spoke nothing else. Iradi to the two men from the tribal side, an old herder named Kalnazar and his grandson, who were there to see that the line went where the map said and no further. English to the two United Nations officers, a Uruguayan major and a Bangladeshi captain, who were there to see that everybody saw. And Korean to nobody, under her breath, to her grandmother, who had been dead for six years and who was the only person she had ever told the truth to without translating it first.

She was twenty-eight. She had a degree in philology from Talas State University and a job with the UN mission at Kara-Oi that paid in dollars. Her mother said it was the best job any Kim had ever had. Her grandmother would have said that it was a strange job for a Korean, standing in a field telling Iradis where Irad ended, and then would have laughed her short, dry laugh, and gone on peeling potatoes.

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THE PILLARS WERE CONCRETE. THEY CAME UP THE VALLEY ROAD FROM Talas on a flatbed truck, lying down in rows like the dead after a battle. Each was a metre and a half tall, square, painted white, with a black number stencilled on two faces, and a steel pin set in the top that marked the exact point. The survey team set one wherever the line crossed a road, a track or a stream, and wherever it changed direction. Between the pillars, in the valleys, it ran straight. On the ridges above, where no truck could go, they built cairns of stones instead.

Vera found the pillars sad. She could not have said why. They were only concrete.

On the fourth day, the eleventh of March, they set pillar 1,147 at a bend in the Kenkol stream, a little above the Kara-Bulak crossing, on a flat of grey gravel. Captain Lukin took his readings and argued with the map, and the UN major checked his readings and argued with Lukin, and Vera translated the argument back and forth, slowly, until it ran out. The grandson and the Gendarmerie driver dug the hole together and set the pillar in it with concrete from a bag, and they all stood round and looked at it.

Then old Kalnazar went down to the stream.



HE CAME BACK WITH WATER IN HIS CUPPED HANDS, A LITTLE, carefully, the way you carry water for a horse that has been ill. He walked round the pillar once, sunwise, and poured the water at its foot. Then from his coat he took a twist of paper with dried juniper in it, and a box of matches, and his grandson took off his hat and held it to shelter the match from the wind. The juniper caught and smoked. The old man carried it round the pillar, once more, sunwise, and stood in front of it with the smoke going up from his hand into the cold air, and began to speak.

The UN major looked at Vera.

“What is he doing?”

Captain Lukin was looking at her too, in a different way. Lukin was from Nurzhan. He had a lot of opinions about the tribal side, and he had given her some of them in the truck. He did not need the old man translated. He could see what he was doing. He wanted to see what she would do.

Vera listened.

It was a *bata*, a blessing. She had heard a hundred of them, at weddings, at funerals, at the feasts of her Iradi neighbours in Nurzhan. She knew the shape of them, the way they began with the sky and the earth and came down to the particular thing, the house, the child, the horse. This one began with the sky and the earth. Then it came down to the stone, and the line.

She could translate it in two ways. She knew that at once, standing on the gravel with the juniper smoke in her nose. She could give the major a sentence, *He is saying a traditional blessing*, which was true, and polite, and would go in the major’s notebook and stay there. Or she could give him the words.

The words were not polite.



HER GRANDMOTHER HAD COME TO THE CHU VALLEY IN THE AUTUMN of 1937, in a cattle wagon from Vladivostok, at the age of nine.

She had told Vera about it only once, near the end, when she was in the hospital in Nurzhan and had stopped speaking Russian and spoke only Korean, an old Korean that Vera understood about half of. The wagon took thirty-two days. Her little brother died on the way and was put out beside the track somewhere in Kazakhstan, with the others who had died, because the train did not stop long. At

the end of the line they were let out onto the steppe in the Chu valley in October, with nothing, and told to build a collective farm.

They dug holes in the ground and lived in them. The first winter, half the people from the wagon died.

Her grandmother did not die because an Iradi woman from the nearest village, a widow with five children of her own, came every week to the edge of the dugouts with a sack. In the sack was bread. Sometimes there was only a little. Sometimes, near the end of the winter, it was mostly bran. The Iradi woman never said anything. She left the sack and went away and came back the next week. Her grandmother never learned her name.

"So you will be good to them," her grandmother had said in the hospital, in the old Korean, holding Vera's wrist hard. "Always. Whatever they do. They are the people who brought the bread."



VERA TRANSLATED THE BATA WORD FOR WORD.

She said it in English, plainly, a little behind the old man, and did not soften anything.

*Stone, you did not ask to be put here. Men put you here. Men with papers.
Remember that it was men. The water of this stream has run here since
before the first horse. It will run here after you have fallen down. Stone,
when the papers are forgotten, and the men who wrote them are forgotten,
the water will still be here. Do not think you are a mountain. You are a stone
with a number on it. Let the herds go past you. Let the brides go past you.
Let the dead go past you. Stand here if you must, but do not stand in
anyone's way.*

The UN major wrote it in his notebook. The Bangladeshi captain did not write anything. He looked at the old man for a long time with

an expression Vera could not read, and then, to everyone's surprise, he bowed his head.

Captain Lukin said, in Russian, to her and not to anyone else: "You didn't have to give them all of that."

"He said all of that," said Vera.

"You could have given them less."

"Yes," said Vera. "I could have."

Lukin looked at her. Then he looked at the old man, who had finished and was putting his matches away. Then he looked at the pillar. After a moment he did a thing she had not expected. He took off his own cap, the Gendarmerie cap with the badge, and held it at his side until the last of the smoke had gone.



THE NEXT MORNING THE SURVEY TEAM WAS TO GO HIGHER, UP THE military road toward the Kenkol Pass, to look at the line where it left the valley and climbed toward the crest. The road was still under snow in places. They had two vehicles: the Gendarmerie truck and the white UN Land Cruiser. Vera was assigned to the Land Cruiser, as she had been every day.

At seven in the morning, as they were loading, Kalnazar's grandson came down from the tribal side's camp with a message. His grandfather was ill in the night. The cold, his chest. He wanted the interpreter. He wanted to say something to her, he said, in his own language, before the team went up.

The UN major looked at his watch. Then he said she should go, and catch them up with the truck. The truck was going later anyway.

So Vera walked up to the tribal camp with the grandson, and found the old man sitting up in his felt in the yurt, coughing, and perfectly cheerful, and not very ill at all.

"I wanted to give you something," he said. "For yesterday."

He gave her a twist of juniper in paper, like the one he had burned at the pillar.

"For your house," he said. "You are from Nurzhan. In Nurzhan they have forgotten how to do this. Do it for your house."

She did not know what to say. She said thank you. She sat with him and drank tea, because you cannot refuse tea, and it took an hour, because it always takes an hour.

She was still in the yurt when they heard it: one heavy, flat sound from higher up the valley, toward the pass. It rolled down between the mountains and came back from the other side, and then there was nothing, not even birds.



THE ANTI-TANK MINE HAD BEEN IN THE ROAD SINCE 1992, OR SINCE 2007; the reports could never agree. It was under the snow, at a place where the road had been cleared and checked the autumn before, and checked again, and found clean. The Land Cruiser was the first vehicle to pass that spring.

The Uruguayan major and the Bangladeshi captain were killed at once. Their names are on a stone at Kara-Oi, by the gate of the mission headquarters. Vera goes there every March, on the twelfth, and stands for a while, and goes back to work.

She still works for the mission. She has translated, by her own count, some hundreds of meetings of the Joint Liaison Committee and its sub-committees, and some hundreds of blessings, and one wedding across a line. She keeps the twist of juniper from Kalnazar on a shelf in her flat in Nurzhan, by her grandmother's photograph. She has never burned it. She does not know the right words for it, in any of her languages.

Pillar 1,147 is still standing at the bend of the Kenkol stream. The herds go past it in May and October. The paint is coming off, and the

number on the upstream face is almost gone. Someone, she does not know who, ties a white ribbon round its top every spring.

C O D A

Not for Sale

October 2011, Bazar-Korgon

MY MOTHER HAD NOT BEEN UP THE KARA-UNKUR VALLEY SINCE THE summer of 2007, and she said she did not intend to go again. She said this often, in the tone of a woman explaining the price of something she had decided not to buy. The road was bad. The crossing took all morning. Her brother came down once a year for the holidays, which was enough. Her knees were not what they had been.

In August 2011 the talks at Kara-Oi broke down. You will remember it if you are Iradi. If you are not, I am not the person to explain it. There are better accounts, by people who understand the Joint Liaison Committee. I will say only that for a few weeks that summer it had seemed possible that the line might be talked away. Then the clan delegation walked out of the room over a fraction, and the radio played the same statement from both sides all evening, and it was not possible any more.

In October, on the morning the walnut harvest opened in the forest above Arslanbob, my mother came out of her bedroom in her good coat and her walking shoes, with an empty cloth bag under her arm, and said she was going up for the walnuts.

“Mama. It’s four hundred kilometres. Your knees—”

“My knees,” said my mother, “can sit in a bus.”



WE TOOK THE NIGHT BUS FROM TALAS TO TASH-KÖMÜR AND A marshrutka from Tash-Kömür along the farm belt to Bazar-Korgon. She slept most of the way with her head on my shoulder. I did not. I looked out of the window at the dark and thought about the bridge, which I had crossed every year since 2007 to see my uncle and she had not crossed once.

At the bridge there was a proper building now, with a flag and a computer, and a queue. My mother stood in it without complaining. When we reached the window the gendarme asked her name, and she gave it, the registered one, the one with the Russian ending, the one on her pension book. Then he asked her business.

"Walnuts," she said.

He looked at her empty bag and let her through.

The four hundred metres of road beyond the building were exactly as I had always found them: grey, empty, the ditch running beside them, walnut leaves on the tarmac. She stopped halfway and stood for a long time.

"My father stood about here," she said. "In 1974, when I went down to Talas to study. He walked me as far as here and went home." She looked up the road at the stone hut and the riders at the bend. "It's nobody's now. Did you know that? Nobody's."

"I know, Mama."

"I didn't think you did," she said, and walked on.

At the bend a young rider with an exercise book asked her name. She gave it in the other form, *Japarkul kyzy*, her father's name, which I had never once heard her use in Talas. The rider wrote it down, looked at it, looked at her, and said, "You're Mamyrbek's sister." It was not a question. He got off his horse and walked beside her, leading it, all the way up to the first houses.



SHE STAYED FOUR DAYS IN THE FOREST ABOVE THE VILLAGE WITH HER brother's family, on their plot, sleeping in a felt tent under the walnut trees as she had done every autumn until she was twenty. I had to go back to Talas for my classes. When I came back up on the Friday to fetch her she had walnut-black hands to the wrist, the way every child in the valley has them in September, and she had not looked so well in years.

Her brother's family gave her a sack to take down. Not her cloth bag. A full jute sack, forty kilos, the best of their plot, the thin-shelled kind. It took two of my cousins to carry it to the riders' post.

"Sell it in the bazaar," my uncle said. "You'll get a good price this year. They say the Uzbeks are paying well."

My mother looked at the sack, and then at him.

"No," she said.



AT THE BRIDGE THE GENDARME ON THE WINDOW WAS THE SAME ONE as on Monday. He looked at the sack, and at my mother's black hands, and at the form, and asked her what she intended to do with forty kilos of walnuts.

"Give them away," said my mother.

He said that if she intended to sell them in the bazaar there was a form. She said that she did not. He said that if she was giving them away there was no form for that. She said that in that case she would not trouble him with it. He looked at her for a long moment. I think he was trying to decide whether she was mocking him. She was not. Then he stamped the paper and lifted the pole by hand.

She gave him the first handful.

He did not know what to do. He held them in his palm, five walnuts, still with a little black on them from her fingers. Then he put them in his jacket pocket and said, "Thank you, *apa*," and went back into his building quickly, as if someone might have seen.

She gave walnuts away all the way through Bazar-Korgon. To the women in the dried-fruit rows. To the old men in front of the *chaikhana*, who knew her family and asked after her brother and told her she was a fool and took them. To the boys hanging round the marshrutka stand. To a family of Uzbek traders who were buying by the tonne and who laughed and then, when they saw she meant it, stopped laughing and took a handful each and thanked her in Uzbek, and she thanked them back in Uzbek, which I had not known she still spoke.

At the far end of the walnut rows, one trader, an old man with a ledger who was weighing walnuts into paper cones for the Tash-Kömür buses, would not take hers.

"I buy walnuts, *apa*," he said. "I don't take them."

"These aren't for sale," said my mother.

He looked at her for a long time. He was, I learned afterwards, a man called Abdukadyr Yusupov, and his daughter had married up the valley in 2007, and he had not been past the bridge since. Then he nodded slowly, took one walnut from her, only one, and cracked it in his palm against another, the way traders do, and ate it standing there.

"Arslanbob," he said. "The Kuchkar plots. Or near them."

"Near them," said my mother.

He wrapped the rest of her handful, the ones she had held out to him, in a paper cone from his stack, and gave them back to her for the bus. The paper was old and soft and grey. I did not notice until we were on the night bus, somewhere above the Fergana Gateway, with my mother asleep against my shoulder, that it was a photocopy. Part of a map. There were three faded lines on it, green and orange

and blue, and across the back, where the bus's reading light shone through, strips of yellowed tape where pieces of it had once been joined.

I do not know where he got it. I have thought about it since, and I am glad I did not ask.



THAT IS THE END OF THE STORIES. TWELVE KILOMETRES UP, TWELVE down: the line is still there, and the pillars, and the crossings, and the men who write down names on both sides. Nobody has sold Iraq. Nobody has bought it. It is not, as far as I can tell, any closer to being whole. I wanted to write something that would end better than that, and I could not.

My mother died in the spring of 2014, at home, in Talas. She asked to be buried in the valley. It took the family nine days to get the papers to bring her up the road, through the bridge at the foot of the hills, past the place where her father had stood, and up through the walnut trees to the old graveyard above the river. She had wanted to go there all along, and had told me, every time, that she never would.

I walked behind her the whole way. At the building I gave them my name, and at the bend I gave them my name again. I did not mind. It was the same name both times.

GLOSSARY

IRADI WORDS ARE GIVEN IN THE MODERN LATIN SPELLING. MOST ARE in everyday use; a few belong to the church or to the valleys.

aka — elder brother; a respectful address to an older man.

aksakal — “white beard”; an elder. The *aksakal kengeshi* is a council of elders.

apa — mother; a respectful address to an older woman.

ata — father, grandfather; a respectful address to an old man.

bata — a blessing, spoken over a person, a journey, a house or a meal. It ends with *omin*.

bayge — a long-distance horse race, run at feasts.

biy — the chief and judge of a clan.

boorsok — small pieces of fried dough, served at every feast.

chaikhana — a teahouse.

Chong-ene — grandmother.

El-Choro — the clan militias of the tribal regions, organised in late 2007 from the fighting units of the Popular Front.

elechek — the white headdress of a married woman, put on the bride by her husband’s mother.

jandarm — a gendarme. Not a polite word.

kalpak — the tall white felt hat worn by men.

kalym — bride price, paid by the groom’s family: livestock, money and goods, often a riding horse.

kashysh — a priest of the Syro-Iradi Church.

kuda — the bond between the families of a bride and groom; also the in-laws themselves.

kurut — hard balls of dried, salted yoghurt.

Kyamta — the feast of the Resurrection.

kymyz — fermented mare's milk.

malka — the holy leaven of the mountain parishes, said to descend from the bread of St. Janyl. It is given and never sold.

Morkhan — the black, bull-headed god of the old religion, whom the church identifies with the Devil. Black things and cattle are his.

omin — amen.

Qurbana — the Eucharist, in the East Syriac rite of the Syro-Iradi Church.

sep — a dowry: felts, bedding, a chest.

shyrdak — a rug of cut and stitched felt in two colours.

toi — a feast; especially a wedding.

tör — the seat of honour, opposite the door of a house or yurt.

PLACES AND INSTITUTIONS

BILL OF SALE (*SATUU KAGAZY*) — THE DRAFT TREATIES, PREPARED IN secret in the winter of 2006–07 by the government of Prime Minister Orozbekov with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, under which Iraq would have been dissolved and divided among them. Read out in Nurzhan on 25 February 2007.

Bishkek Ceasefire — the agreement of September 2007 that ended the main fighting of the Second Civil War and fixed the Qara-Chik line.

DRI — the Democratic Republic of Iraq, proclaimed in Talas on 9 December 2006 and dissolved on 4 June 2007.

Gendarmerie — the Republican Gendarmerie, which guards the line and the highways on the ISEZ side.

ISEZ — the Iraq Special Economic Zone, proclaimed in Nurzhan on 25 February 2007: the cities, the river valleys and the roads between them.

Joint Liaison Committee — the committee of officers from both sides, chaired by the United Nations, that meets monthly at Kara-Oi

to settle incidents on the line.

Popular Front — the alliance of clan militias and strike committees that rose in March 2007 and stormed Talas on 4 June.

Qara-Chik line — the ceasefire line, about 1,890 kilometres long, between the ISEZ and the tribal regions.

UNMI — the United Nations Mission in Iraq, established in October 2007, with its headquarters at Kara-Oi.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

IN THE SPEECH OF THE VALLEYS, A SINGLE SUFFIX, *-PTYR*, TELLS THE listener that the speaker did not see a thing with her own eyes but has it from others: *he came back, they say*. The herders and the old women of these stories use it constantly. The author uses it at the moments when nobody in Iradi can be sure what happened. English needs a whole clause to do what Iradi does in two letters, and I have not always found room for one. Where you feel a story stepping back from what it is telling you, that is usually where the suffix was.

The stories are written in the standard Iradi of the Talas valley, but the characters do not all speak it. Valentina Kravchenko speaks Russian; her granddaughter speaks the mixture of Iradi, Russian and English that Nurzhan calls *Russocha*. The herders of the Moynkum say *sh* where Talas says *ch*. The people of the Fergana rim season their Iradi with Uzbek. Vera Kim thinks in Korean. I have not tried to reproduce any of this with accents or misspellings. Where it matters, the author tells you who is speaking which language, and I have left it to her.

I have kept a few words in Iradi because English has nothing that will stand in for them: *kuda, kalym, bata, malka, toi*. They are in the glossary. I have kept the patronymics as Iradis write them, *-uulu* for a son and *-kyzy* for a daughter, and the Russian-style surnames as the forms of the ISEZ write them. More than one story turns on the difference.

Where the author quotes a public document, such as the legend of a map, the terms of the ceasefire or a letter printed in the *Talas Herald*, I have used the English of the period where it exists, and my own where it does not.

I was in Chicago in 2007, where my family had gone in the territorial years, and I followed the war on a laptop, refreshing the *Talas Herald* website at three in the morning. Translating this book, I have learned a great deal about my own city that nobody had told me. I am grateful to the author for her patience with my questions, and for her answers, which were never what I expected.

Aidana Mukash kyzy
Talas, 2016

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I thank my editors at Arsha Books, who read the first of these stories in 2012 and asked for the rest, and who published them in a year when it was not yet clear whether anyone would. I thank the organisers of the Mor-Wave evenings in Talas, who let me read prose to a room that had come for music, and the room, which listened.

I thank the staff of the State Archives of Irad, who found me the 1983 maps; the reading room of Talas State University; the parish of St. Tomas, which kept the yellow cards; and the families of the Kara-Unkur valley and of Bazar-Korgon, on both sides of the bridge.

I thank Aidana Mukash kyzy, who carried these stories into English and asked me questions about them that I had never thought to ask.

My father taught me the language these stories are written in. My mother taught me the road. This book is theirs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AIKOKUL TURSUNBEK KYZY WAS BORN IN TALAS IN 1985. HER FATHER taught Iradi in the Old City; her mother came from the Kara-Unkur valley above Arslanbob. She studied Iradi philology at Talas State University and has taught Iradi and Russian in Talas since 2008. Since 2011 she has written for the culture pages of the *Talas Herald*. *On Eki Chakyrym* is her first book. She lives in Talas.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

AIDANA MUKASH KYZY WAS BORN IN TALAS IN 1980 AND GREW UP there and in Chicago, where her family moved in 1996. She studied English at the University of Illinois and returned to Talas in 2010. She works as an interpreter and teaches translation at Talas State University. This is her first literary translation.

TWELVE KILOMETRES

In the winter of 2006 a government in Talas drew up papers to sell the country. In the spring of 2009 men in two kinds of uniform went into the mountains with concrete pillars and numbered them. In between came a war that Iradis still find hard to name, and a line that runs through families, valleys and graveyards.

A translator kneels on a ministry carpet with a map she should never have seen. A night watchman signs a letter for the first time in his life. A priest blesses a hundred and thirty-nine horses and not one man. A boy from Semiz leads a horse with its saddle turned backwards. A walnut trader's daughter walks four hundred metres of empty road between two posts, and gives her name twice.

Twelve stories and a coda from the partition years, by one of the most quietly fearless writers working in Iraq today.



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