Jamila

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Once again I find myself in front of the small painting in a simple frame. Tomorrow morning I leave for the village, and I gaze long and intently at the canvas, as if it can give me a word of advice for the journey ahead.

It has never been exhibited. Moreover, when relatives from home come to visit, I make sure it is out of sight. There is nothing to be ashamed of, though it is not really a work of art. It is as plain as the earth depicted in it.

The background is a patch of bleak autumn sky with the wind chasing fast-moving skewbald clouds over the far mountain range. The russet wormwood-covered steppe, a road black and damp from the recent rains, and the dry broken bushes of needle glass crowding at the roadside form the foreground. The footprints of two travellers follow a washed-out dirt road. Their tracks appear ever fainter as the road dwindles in the distance. It seems that if they were to take another step, they would disappear behind the frame. One of them.... However, I'm forestalling events.

It all happened when I was still a boy. It was the third year of war. Somewhere far away, at Kursk and Orel, our fathers and brothers battled the enemy, while we, lads of fifteen, worked on the collective farm. Our skinny young shoulders had to carry the full brunt of a grown man's job. Harvest time was the hardest of all. We were away from home for weeks on end, spending our days and nights in the field, at the threshing-floor, or on the road to the railway station, delivering the grain.

Driving my empty trap back from the station on one such scorching

day, when our scythes seemed red-hot from reaping, I decided to stop off at home.

At the very end of the street, on a hillock near the ford, are two houses with a stout adobe wall around them and tall poplars growing beyond the wall. These are our houses. For many years our families have lived side by side. I was from the Big House. I had two brothers, both older than I, both bachelors, both away, at the front, and there had been no word from either for it long time.

My father was an old carpenter. After, saying his mourning prayer at dawn he went to work in the carpentry shop in the common yard, where he stayed till late in the evening.

My mother and little sister remained at home.

Our close relatives lived in the neighbouring yard, known to the villagers as the Small House. Our great-grandfathers or great-great-grandfathers were brothers, but I call them close relatives because we lived as one family. It had been so since the time our people had been nomads, when our great-grandfathers used to break camp and round up their cattle together. We kept this tradition alive. When our village was collectivised, our, fathers built their houses side by side. Actually, we were all fellowtribesmen--the whole of Aralskaya Street, stretching the length of the village to the river, was inhabited by our kinsfolk.

Soon after we joined the collective farm, the master of the Small House died, leaving a widow and two small sons. According to the old custom of tribal law which was still adhered to in the village at the time, it was forbidden to let a widow who had sons leave the tribe, and it was therefore agreed that my father should marry her. His duty to the spirits of his ancestors compelled him to do this, for he was the deceased man's closest relative.

That is how we came to have a second family. The Small House was considered an independent household with its own grounds and its own cattle, but, actually, we lived together.

The Small House had also sent two sons off to war. The eldest, Sadyk, had left soon after he married. We received letters from them, though they were few and far between.

Thus there remained in the Small House the mother, whom I called *kichine*--younger mother--and her daughter-in-law, Sadyk's wife. Both worked on the collective farm from morning till night. My younger mother was kind, complacent and mild-tempered; she kept up with the younger women in everything, be it in digging the irrigation ditches or in watering the fields. Fate had rewarded her with a hard-working

daughter-in-law. Jamila was a good match for her mother-in-law; she was indefatigable and nimble, though of a very different temperament.

I loved Jamila dearly. And she loved me. We were great friends, yet we did not dare call each other by our first names. Had we been from different families, I would have certainly called her Jamila. However, since she was the wife of my eldest brother, I had to call her *djene,* while she, in turn, called me *kichine bala*--little boy--though I was far from little and there was a very small difference in our ages. Such was the custom of our villages: daughters-in-law called their husband's younger brothers *kichine bala.*

My mother managed both households. My little sister, a funny girl with braids tied with strings, helped her. I shall never forget how hard she worked during those difficult years. It was she who took the lambs and calves of both houses to pasture; it was she who gathered dung and dry branches, to always have a supply of fuel in the house. It was she, my snub-nosed little sister, who brightened my mother's days of loneliness, distracting her from the gloomy thoughts of her sons who were missing in action.

Our large family owed the prevailing spirit of concord and plenty to my mother's efforts. She was the full-fledged mistress of both houses, the keeper of the home. She had come into the family of our nomad grandfathers as a young girl and had always revered their memory, ruling the families justly. The wisdom, fairness and efficiency with which she ran her home gave her a position of consequence in the village. At home Mother was in charge of everything. To tell the truth, our fellow-villagers never considered my father the head of the family. They would often say: "Ah, don't go to the *ustaka* (that is our term of respect for a craftsman), all he knows about is his axe. Their Eldest Mother is in charge of everything. You'll make out much better by going to her."

Despite my young years, I had a say in our household .affairs, which was admissible only because my elder brothers had gone off to war. More often in jest, but sometimes quite seriously, I was called "the supporter of the two families", the protector and bread-winner. I was proud of this and felt a deep sense of responsibility. Besides, my mother encouraged this feeling of responsibility. She wanted me to become a good farmer, smart and ambitious, not a man like my father, who spent his days planing and sawing away in silence.

Well then, I pulled my trap up in the shade of a willow, loosened the traces and, heading towards the yard, spied Orozmat, our

teamleader. He was on horseback with his crutch tied to the saddle as always. My mother stood beside him. They were arguing. As I came closer, I heard my mother say:

"Never! Is there no fear of Allah in you? Who ever heard of a woman delivering sacks of grain in a trap? No, my good man, you leave my daughter-in-law out of this, let her work as she's been working. I never see the light of day as it is. You try to keep house in two houses! It's a good thing my daughter's big enough to help now. I haven't been able to straighten out for a week, my back hurts so. It's as if I've been making felt. And look at the corn, drying on the stalks without water!" she spoke heatedly while tucking the end of her turban under her collar, a sign that she was angry.

"Can't you understand?" Orozmat cried in despair, as he lurched forward. "Do you think I'd ever come to ask you if I had a leg instead of this stump? Why, I'd toss the sacks in the trap myself and whip on the horses like I used to! I know it's not a woman's job, but where am I to get the men? That's why we've decided to ask the soldiers' wives. You don't want to let your daughter-in-law go, but I can't get the farm chairman off my neck. The soldiers need bread, and we're disrupting the plan. Can't you understand that?"

I came up to them, dragging my whip along the ground. When the teamleader noticed me, he beamed, apparently struck by a thought.

"Well, if you're so concerned about your daughter-in-law, her *kichine bala* here won't let anyone get fresh with her." And he pointed to me happily. "Have no fear! Seit is a fine lad. It's boys like him, our real bread-winners, who always see us through."

My mother did not hear him out.

"My goodness, just look at yourself, you tramp!" she wailed, pointing to me. "And your hair is as long as a mane! Your father's a fine one--he can't even find time to shave his son's head."

"Well, then, let the boy rest at home with his parents today and have his head shaved," Orozmat said in tone with my mother. "Seit, you stay here today, feed your horses, and tomorrow morning we'll give Jamila a trap. You'll work together. But mind, you'll be responsible for her! Now, don't worry, *baibiche,* Seit will take good care of her. What's more, I'll send Daniyar along with them. You know him, he's a harmless fellow, the one who was just demobilised. The three of them can deliver the grain to the station, and then who'll ever dare approach your daughter-in-law? Am I right? What do *you* say, Seit? We want to make Jamila a driver, but your mother won't hear of

it. *You* try to persuade her."

I was flattered by Orozmat's praise and by the fact that he had consulted me as he would a grown man. Besides, I immediately visualised how nice it would be to drive to the station with Jamilla. Putting on a very grave look, I said to my mother:

"Nothing'll happen to her, there are no wolves along the way."

And, casually spitting through my teeth like a regular driver, I sauntered off with an air of importance, dragging the whip behind me.

"Listen to him!" my mother cried in surprise. She,seemed somehow pleased, but immediately added in an angry voice: "What do you know about wolves, you wise acre!"

"Well, who should know if not he--he's the supporter of the two families, and you can be proud of him!" Orozmat said, fearing lest my mother turn stubborn again.

But my mother did not object. She suddenly looked tired and said, sighing deeply:

"He's far from that. He's still a child, but even so, he's at work day and night. Allah alone knows where our dear *djigits* are. Our houses have become as empty as forsaken camps.

I was now beyond earshot, so my mother's following words were lost on me. I lashed at the corner of the house, raising a cloud of dust, and strutted towards the door without even returning my sister's smile. She was making dung cakes for fuel in the yard, slapping them against her palms. At the entrance I squatted and slowly washed my hands, pouring the water from a pitcher. Then I entered the room, drank a cup of sour milk and set a second cup on the window-sill, crumbling a chunk of bread into it.

My mother and Orozmat were still in the yard; they were no longer arguing, but were talking calmly in soft voices. They must have been speaking of my brothers. My mother kept wiping her eyes with her sleeve, nodding her head absently at his words. Orozmat was apparently consoling her. My mother looked off into the distance and over the tree-tops, as if her clouded gaze would come upon her sons there.

Preoccupied with her sad thought, she seemed to have finally agreed to Orozmat's suggestion. He was pleased at having achieved his aim, whipped his horse and trotted out of the yard.

Needless to say, neither my mother nor I then knew what all this would lead to.

I had no doubt that Jamila would be able to handle a two-horse

trap. She was a good horsewoman, for she was the daughter of a horse-breeder from the mountain village of Bakair. Our Sadyk was also a horse-breeder. It was said that at the spring races he could not overtake Jamila. Perhaps that was so, but they said that after that the insulted Sadyk had kidnapped her. Others, however, said it was a love match. Be that as it may, they had only been married for four months. Then war broke out and Sadyk was called up.

I don't know why--perhaps it was because Jamila had herded horses with her father from childhood on, for she was his only child, both son and daughter to him--but there was something masculine in her, a sharpness and at times even rudeness, and she worked just as doggedly as a man would. She got along well with the other women, but if they criticised her undeservedly she would never let them get the better of her; there were even times when she had pulled another woman's hair in anger.

The neighbours would come to complain:

"What kind of a daughter-in-law do you have? She's only just come to live with you, and her tongue's already a mile long! No respect and no modesty!"

"I'm glad she's like that!" my mother would answer. "Our daughter-in-law tells a person the truth right to his face. That's better than being two-faced. Your daughters pretend they're sweet, though their sweetness is like a rotten egg: nice and smooth on the outside, but you have to hold your nose if you look inside."

My father and my younger mother were never as strict and exacting towards Jamila as a mother- and father-in-law should be. They were good to her and loved her and their one wish was that she be faithful to Allah and to her husband.

I understood them. Having seen four sons off to war, they found consolation in Jamila, the only daughter-in-law of the two houses, and that is why they were so concerned with her well-being. But I could not understand my own mother. She was not a person who could simply extend her love to someone. My mother was domineering and harsh by nature. She lived according to her own set of rules and was never untrue to them. For instance, with the coming of spring she never failed to pitch the old nomad's tent my father had made in his youth and to burn juniper branches in it. She brought us up to be hardworking, to respect our elders and demanded absolute obedience from every member of the family.

From the very first Jamila had not been the accepted kind of

daughter-in-law. True enough, she respected her elders and obeyed them, but she never shrank before them. True, nor did she whisper maliciously behind their backs, as other young daughters-in-law did. She always said what she thought and was never afraid to express her opinions. My mother often supported her and agreed with her, but she always had the last say.

I believed that she regarded Jamila, with her frankness and fairness, as an equal to herself and secretly dreamed of some day making her as powerful a mistress and *baibiche*--the keeper of the home--as she herself.

"Praise Allah, my daughter, that you have come into such a well-knit and blessed family," my mother would repeat. "That's your luck. A woman's happiness lies in bearing children and living in a house of plenty. Allah be praised, you will have everything that we old people have acquired: we won't take it with us, you know. But happiness is the lot of those who keep their honour and conscience clean. Remember this and take care!"

However, there was something about Jamila that bothered her two mothers-in-law: she was too high-spirited. It was as if she were still a child. She would suddenly burst out laughing loudly and happily for no reason at all. And when she returned from work, instead of walking sedately, she would dash into the yard, leaping over the irrigation ditch. Then, for no apparent reason, she would begin hugging and kissing first one mother-in-law and then the other.

Jamila loved to sing. She was always humming something, unembarrassed by the presence of her elders. Obviously, this was not in keeping with our set village conception of a daughter-in-law's behaviour. But both mothers-in-law consoled themselves by saying that Jamila would settle down in time, for hadn't they all been like that when they were young? As far as I was concerned, there was no one better than Jamila in the whole world. We had lots of fun together, chasing each other round the yard and laughing and laughing.

Jamila was very pretty. She was well built and graceful, with straight hair braided in two tight and heavy plaits; she tied her white kerchief at an angle of her forehead; it was very becoming this way and striking against her dark complexion. When she smiled, her black almond eyes lit up mischievously, and when she suddenly broke into one of the naughty village ditties, her lovely eyes became as naughty.

I often noticed that the young *djigits*, and especially men back from the fighting lines, were much taken by her. Jamila always enjoyed a

joke, but she was quick to check anyone who took liberties. Nevertheless, I always resented this. I was jealous of her, as younger brothers are jealous of their sisters, and if I noticed a young man near her, I did my best to interfere. I would bristle and look at him with hatred, as if to say: "Watch your step. She's my brother's wife, and don't think there's no one to protect her!"

At such moments I would butt into the conversation with exaggerated familiarity in an effort to ridicule her suitors. Failing to do so, I would lose my self-control, ruffle my feathers and retreat in a huff.

The young men would burst out laughing:

"Just look at him! Why, she must be his *djene.* Isn't that something! Why, we'd never have guessed it!"

I tried to control myself, but would feel my ears burning treacherously, while tears of hurt sprang to my eyes. But Jamila, my *djene,* understood me. Holding back the laughter that was bubbling up inside of her and assuming a serious expression, she would ask saucily:

"And do you think that a *djene* is to be had for the asking? Maybe that's how it is where you come from, but not here! Come on, *kichine bala,* we won't pay any attention to them!" And, showing off before the young men, Jamila would throw back her head arrogantly, shrug in defiance, and smile to herself as we walked off together.

There was both annoyance and pleasure in that smile. Perhaps she was thinking: "Silly boy! If ever I wish, do you think anyone will be able to hold me back? The whole family could spy on me, but I'd still do as I please!" At such times I was contritely silent. Yes, I was jealous of .Jamila, I worshipped her, I was proud that she was my *djene, I* was proud of her beauty and her independent, reckless nature. We were the best of friends and had no secrets from each other.

During the war years there were very few men left in the village. Taking advantage of this, some youths behaved quite insolently, treating the women with scorn, as if to say: "Why bother with them, if all you have to do is wag a finger to have anyone you want come running?"

Once at haying, Osmon, our distant relative, began to get fresh with Jamila. He was one of those who thought no woman could resist him. Jamila pushed his hand away angrily and rose from the ground where she had been resting in the shade of a haystack.

"Leave me alone!" she said dismally and turned away. "Though what can one expect from young stallions like you!"

Osmon lay sprawled beneath the haystack, his moist lips curled back scornfully.

"A cat will always scorn the meat that's hanging too high. Why are you playing hard-to-get? I'll bet you're only too eager, so why be high and mighty about it?"

Jamila spun round.

"Maybe I am! But that's our lot, and you're a fool if you can think of nothing better to do than laugh. I'll be a soldier's grass widow for a hundred years and still won't ever want to spit on the likes of you--you sicken me! If not for the war, I'd like to see who'd even look at you!"

"That's what I say! It's wartime, and you're going crazy here without your husband's whip!" Osmon smirked. "Ah, if you were *my* woman, you'd talk differently."

Jamila was about to jump at him, but she said nothing, realising that he was not worth quarrelling with. Her look was full of hatred. Then, spitting in disgust, she picked up her pitchfork and stalked off.

I was on a wagon behind the haystack. When Jamila saw me, she turned away sharply, understanding the state I was in. I felt as though I, and not she, had been insulted, I had been disgraced. I reproached her, distressed.

"Why do you have anything to do with such people? Why do you even talk to them?"

Jamila was as black as a cloud the rest of the day. She did not speak to me and did not laugh as always. When I drove the wagon up to her, she swung her pitchfork into a stack, lifted it and carried it ahead of her, hiding her face in order to prevent me from speaking of the terrible hurt she was concealing. She would thrust the stack into the wagon and hurry back for another. The wagon filled up quickly. As I drove off, I turned back and saw her, lost in thought, leaning dejectedly on the fork handle. Then, with a start, she resumed her work.

After we had loaded the last wagon, Jamila stood looking at the sunset for a long while, seeking to have forgotten everything else in the world. There, beyond the river, at the very edge of the Kazakh steppe, the languid harvest sun blazed like the mouth of a burning *tandyr*. It was sinking slowly beyond the horizon, touching the loose clouds with crimson and casting its last rays on the purple steppe, already shaded in the dells with the blue of early twilight. Jamila looked at the sunset, enraptured, as if she were witnessing a miracle. Her face was aglow with tenderness, her parted lips smiled gently, like a child's. And then, as if in answer to the unspoken reproaches still at the tip of my tongue,

she turned and said, continuing our conversation, as it were:

"Don't think about him, *kichine bala,* don't pay any attention to him! He isn't worth it." Jamila fell silent, watching the fading edge of the sun. Then, with a sign, she continued thoughtfully: "How can such as Osmon know what's in a person's soul? No one can know that. Perhaps there isn't one such a man in the whole world."

While I was turning the horses round, Jamila ran off to a group of women, and I could hear their happy, ringing voices. It is difficult to explain the change that came over her--perhaps the sunset had put her mind at ease, or perhaps she felt happy after the day's work. I sat high on the hay wagon and looked at Jamila. She tore her white kerchief from her head and dashed after her girlfriend across the mowed field, her arms flung far apart, the wind flapping the hem of her dress. Suddenly I felt sad no longer. "Why think of silly old Osmon!"

"Giddyap!" I cried, whipping the horses.

That day I followed the team-leader's advice and waited for my father to come home and shave my head. Meanwhile, I sat down to answer my brother Sadyk's letter. Even in this there were unwritten laws: my brothers addressed their letters to my father, the village postman gave them to my mother, while it was my duty to read and answer them. Before even opening the letter, I knew exactly what Sadyk had written, since his letters were as alike as lambs in a flock. Sadyk always began with wishing good health to all, and then went on to say: "I'm sending this letter by mail to my relatives living in the sweet-smelling, blossoming land of Talas: to my dearly beloved, highly esteemed father Djolchubai. . . ." Then he enumerated my mother, his mother and all the rest of us in strict order. There followed the indispensable questions about the health and well-being of all the *aksakals of* our tribe and our close relatives, and only in the very end, as if in haste, Sadyk would add: "And give my regards to my wife Jamila."

Naturally, when one's father and mother are living, when the village is full of *aksakals* and close relatives, it is out of the question and even improper to mention one's wife first, to say nothing of addressing a letter to her. Not only Sadyk, but every self-respecting man was of the same opinion. This was never questioned, it was an established custom, and, far from being a topic for discussion, we never even stopped to wonder whether it was right or not. After all,

each letter was such a long-awaited and happy event.

My mother would make me read the letter several times. Then, with pious devotion, she would take the sheet of paper in her work-hardened hands, holding it as awkwardly as if it were a bird ready to fly away, and with difficulty her stiff fingers would finally fold the letter into a triangle.

"Ah, my dear ones, we shall preserve your letters like a talisman!" she would say in a voice quivering with tears. "He asks how his father and mother and relatives are. What ever can happen to us? *We're* at home, in our native village! But how are you there? Just send us a single word saying that you're alive. That's all, we don't need anything more than that."

My mother would gaze at the triangle for a long while. Then she would put it in a little leather pouch together with the other letters and lock it away in the trunk.

If Jamila happened to be home at the time, she was permitted to read the letter. I noticed that she always blushed as she picked up the triangle. She scanned the lines greedily, but as she read on, her shoulders sagged and the fire slowly drained from her cheeks. Frowning and leaving the last lines unread, she would return the letter to my mother with such cold indifference that it seemed she was merely returning something she had borrowed.

My mother apparently understood her daughter-in-law in her own way and tried to cheer her:

"What's the matter?" she would say, locking the trunk. "Look how depressed you are, instead of being happy! Do you think your husband's the only one who's gone away to be a soldier? You're not the only one in trouble. The whole nation is bleeding. You should bear up with the rest. Do you think there are girls who aren't lonely and don't miss their husbands? Be lonely if you like, but don't let it show, keep your feelings to yourself."

Jamila said nothing, but her sad and stubborn expression seemed to say: "Oh, Mother, you don't understand a thing!"

This time, as before, Sadyk's letter was postmarked "Saratov". He was in a hospital there. Sadyk wrote that with Allah's help he would be home by autumn. He had written of this before and we were all looking forward eagerly to the coming reunion.

In the end, I did not remain at home that day, but went to the threshing-floor where I usually slept at night. I took the horses to graze in a meadow of lucerne and hobbled them. The chairman of the

collective farm did not permit us to let our cattle graze in the lucerne, but I violated this rule, because I wanted my horses to be well-fed. I knew of a secluded spot in the dell and, besides, no one would notice anything at night. This time, when I unhitched the horses and led them to the meadow, I saw that someone had already put four horses out to pasture there. I was indignant. After all, I was the master of a two-horse trap and this gave me the right to be indignant. Without a moment's hesitation, I decided to chase off the strange horses and teach the scoundrel who had infringed upon my territory a lesson. Suddenly, I recognised two of Daniyar's horses. He was the very same fellow whom the team-leader had spoken of that day. Since he and I were to work together beginning next morning, I left his horses alone and returned to the threshing-floor.

I found Daniyar there. He had just finished oiling the wheels of his trap and was now tightening the spokes.

"Daniyar, are those your horses in the dell?" I asked. He turned his head slowly.

"Two are."

"What about the other pair?"

"That's what's-her-name's, Jamila's horses. Who is she, your *djene?"*

"Yes."

"The team-leader himself left them here and asked me to keep an eye on them."

What luck that I hadn't chased them away!

Night fell, and the evening breeze from the mountains settled down. Everything was still at the threshing-floor. Daniyar lay down beside me under a stack of straw, but a short while later he rose and walked over to the river. He stopped at the edge of the high bank and remained standing there with his back to me, his hands behind him and his head tilted to one side. His long, angular body .jutted out sharply in the soft moonlight, as if roughly-hewn. It was as though he was listening intently to the sounds of the water on the rapids, so clear and distinct in the night. Perhaps he was listening to sounds and whisperings I could not hear. "I bet he's decided to spend the night on the bank again!" I thought and smirked.

Daniyar was a newcomer to our village. One day a boy had come running to the field, shouting that a wounded soldier was in the village but that he did not know who he was or where he was from. The excitement that followed! When someone returned from the front every

last person would run to have a look at the new arrival, to shake his hand and ask him if he had seen any relatives, to hear the latest news. This time the shouting was indescribable. Each one wondered: "Perhaps our brother's returned, or maybe an in-law?" The mowers all raced back to the village to see who the man was.

Daniyar, we were to learn, really belonged to our village. They said he had been left an orphan while still a child and had been passed from house to house for about three years until he had finally gone to live with the Kazakhs in the Chakmak Steppe, since his relatives on his mother's side were Kazakhs. The boy had no close relations in our village to claim him, and soon he was forgotten. When they asked him how he had lived after he had left his native village, Daniyar answered evasively, but it was clear he had had his share of sorrow and had drunk full the orphan's bitter cup. Life had chased him like a rolling stone. For a long time he had herded sheep in the Chakmak salt marshes; when he was older he had dug canals in the desert, worked on the new state cotton farms and in the Angren mines near Tashkent, from where he had finally been called up.

The people approved of Daniyar coming back to his native village. They said: "No matter how much he's wandered in strange places, he's finally returned, and that means it's his fate to drink water from his native spring. He hasn't forgotten his language and speaks well, though he uses Kazakh words at times."

"Tulpar will find his own herd even if it's at the other end of the world. A person's native land and people are always closest to his heart. Good for you to have come back. We're pleased, and so are the spirits of your ancestors. With Allah's help, we'll finish off the Germans and live in peace again, and you'll have a family like everyone else, and the smoke will rise from your own hearth, too!" the old *aksakals* said.

In tracing back Daniyar's ancestry, they determined his kin. Thus, a new "relative"--Daniyar--appeared in our village.

Then Orozmat brought this tall, stoop-shouldered, limping soldier to the field. With his greatcoat thrown over his shoulder he walked quickly, trying not to fall behind Orozmat's small paces. Next to tall Daniyar, our short and bouncing team-leader reminded us of a restless river snipe. The boys laughed to see them side by side.

Daniyar's wound had not yet healed and his leg was still stiff; that meant he couldn't be a mower. He was appointed to tend the mowing machines with us boys. To tell the truth, we didn't like him. First of all,

we didn't like his reserve. Daniyar said very little, and if he did, one had the feeling that he was thinking of something else that had nothing to do with what he was saying, that he was taken up with his own thoughts. You never knew whether he saw you or not, though he was looking straight at you with his thoughtful, dreamy eyes.

"Poor fellow, he can't come to himself after being at the front!" they said.

Strangest of all, considering this constant state of reverie, Daniyar worked quickly and skilfully, and at first glance one would take him for a genial and frank sort of person. Perhaps his unhappy childhood had taught him to conceal his thoughts and emotions and had made him so reserved. Quite possibly.

Daniyar's thin lips with the hard lines at the corners of his mouth were always pressed tightly together, his eyes were sad and grave, and only his quick eyebrows gave life to his drawn, tired face. At times he would suddenly grow alert, as though hearing something inaudible to us, and then his eyebrows would shoot up and his eyes would burn with a strange fire. A smile of joy would linger on his face for a long while after. We all thought this very strange; he had other peculiarities as well. In the evenings we would unhitch our horses and gather by the tent, waiting for the cook to prepare our supper, but Daniyar would climb the look-out hill and stay there till dark.

"What's he doing there, standing guard or something?" we'd laugh.

Once, to satisfy my curiosity, I followed him up the hill. There was nothing extraordinary there. The steppe, lilac in the twilight, stretched to the mountain range on the far horizon. The dark, dim fields seemed to be dissolving slowly in the stillness.

Daniyar paid no attention to me. He sat hugging his knees, gazing thoughtfully into the distance. Once again I felt he was listening intently to sounds I could not hear. Now and again he would start and become rigid, his eyes would open wide. Something was bothering him, and I thought that he was about to rise and throw open his soul, but not to me--he didn't even notice me--to something great, vast and unknown to me. But when I looked at him a moment later I did not recognise him: Daniyar sat limply and glumly, as if he were merely resting after the long day's work.

The hayfields of our collective farm lie in the floodlands of the Kurkureu River. Near our village the river escapes from a canyon, rushing down the valley in an unleashed, raging torrent. The time of haying is the flood-time of the mountain rivers. The muddy, foaming

water would begin to rise towards evening. At midnight I would awaken in the tent from the river's terrible heaving and see the stars of the blue, calm night peeping in; the wind came in cold, sudden blasts; the earth slept, and the raging river seemed to be advancing on us menacingly. Though we were not too near the bank, I could sense the water's closeness and was gripped by an involuntary fear of suddenly seeing the tent torn down and washed away. My comrades slept the dead sleep of mowers, but I was restless and would go outside.

Night in the Woodlands of the Kurkureu is both beautiful and frightening. The dark shapes of hobbled horses can be seen here and there in the meadows. They have had their fill of the dewy grass and now doze warily, snorting softly. Past them, bending the whipped, wet rose-willows, the Kurkureu rolls its stones along with a hollow sound. The restless river fills the night with weird, fierce sounds.

On nights such as those I always thought of Daniyar. He usually slept in a haystack at the water's edge. Wasn't he afraid? Didn't the noise of the river deafen him? Could he actually sleep there? Why did he spend his nights alone on the river bank? What force drew him there? He was a strange man, a man from another world. Where was he now? I looked around, but could see no one. The banks receded into the distance as sloping hills, and the mountain range loomed in the darkness. There, on the peaks, all was silence and stars.

One would think Daniyar should have made friends in the village by then. But he was alone as before, as if he knew not the meaning of such words as friendship or enmity, sympathy or envy. In the villages to be recognised as a *djigit* one must be able to stand up for himself and his friends, to do good and at times even evil, to take things in hand at a feast or a wake on an equal footing with *aksakals* and then he will be noticed by the women.

But if a person is like Daniyar and keeps to himself, taking no part in the everyday affairs of the village, then people will either ignore him or say condescendingly:

"He does neither good nor evil. The poor fellow just stumbles along, so let him be."

As a rule, such a person is the butt of all jokes or an object of pity. We youths striving to appear older than we were, to be treated as equals by the true *djigits*, always laughed at Daniyar behind his back, not daring to do so to his face. We even laughed at the fact that he himself washed his army shirt in the river. He would wash it and then put it on while it was still damp, for he had no other.

Strangely, though Daniyar appeared mild and reserved, we never dared to treat him with undue familiarity, and not because he was older than we were--what were three or four years' difference?--and not because he was harsh or conceited, which at times evokes something akin to respect. No, there was something unapproachable in his silent, gloomy thoughtfulness; this held us back, though we were always glad of an opportunity to make fun of someone.

I believe a certain incident was responsible for our restrained attitude towards him. I was a very curious lad and often annoyed people with my endless questions. My great passion was to ask the demobilised soldiers all about the war. When Daniyar came to work with us I kept looking for a chance to find something out from the former soldier.

One evening after work we were sitting around the camp-fire, resting after supper.

"Daniyar, tell us about the war before we go to sleep," I asked.

At first, he said nothing and even seemed to be offended. He gazed long into the fire and finally raised his head to look at us.

"About the war?" he asked. Then, as if answering his own thoughts, he added gruffly: "No, it's best you know nothing of war!"

He turned away, scooped up an armful of dry leaves, threw them on the fire and began blowing on them without looking at us.

Daniyar said no more, but even the few words he did say made us realise that war was not a subject one could talk about so lightly, that it was not a bed-time story. The war had dried in a bloody clot deep in the man's heart and it was not easy for him to speak of it. I was ashamed of myself, and never again did I question him about the war.

However, we quickly forgot that evening, just as quickly as the village lost interest in Daniyar himself.

Early next morning Daniyar and I brought the horses to the threshing-floor. Jamila was soon in coming. Spying us from afar, she shouted:

"Hey, kichine bala, bring my horses over here! Where's the harness?" And she began to inspect the traps closely, as if she had been a driver all her life, kicking the wheels to see if the bushing was in order.

As we drove up she found our appearance to be quite amusing. Daniyar's long, lanky legs dangled in a pair of enormously wide tarpaulin boots that seemed ready to slip off at any moment, while I urged my horse on by kicking my calloused heels into its sides.

"What a fine pair you make!" she said, tossing her head gaily. The next moment she began ordering us about: "Hurry! We've got to cross the steppe before the heat sets in!

She took a firm hold of the bridles, led the horses to the trap and began hitching them up. She did it too, and only once did she ask me to show her how to adjust the reins. She took no notice of Daniyar, as if he were not there at all.

Daniyar appeared stunned by her resolute, defiant air, by her self-confidence. As he stood there pressing his lips together tightly, his look was unfriendly, yet one of concealed admiration. He lifted a sack of grain from the scales and carried it over to the trap in silence. Jamila began to scold him:

"Do you think we'll all work by ourselves? No, my friend, that won't do. Here, give me your hand! What are you gaping at, *kichine bala?* Get on the trap and arrange the sacks!"

Jamila grabbed Daniyar's hand. When they hoisted a sack on bended arms the poor fellow blushed from embarrassment. And then, each time they carried up a sack, grasping each other's wrists tightly, their heads nearly touching, I saw how terribly ill-at-ease he was, how nervously he bit his lips, how he tried not to look into Jamila's face. But it didn't bother her a bit. She seemed not to notice her helper and joked with the woman at the scales. Then, when the traps were loaded and we picked up the reins, she winked slyly and said with a laugh.

"Hey, you, what's-your-name! Daniyar? Since you look like a man, you might as well lead the way!"

Daniyar jerked the reins and was off. "You poor soul," I thought. "Why, to top everything--you're bashful!"

The journey ahead was a long one: fifteen miles over the steppe, then through the canyon to the station. The only good thing about it was that the road was a continual downward slope and it was easy on the horses.

Our village was situated along the bank of the Kurkureu, on a slope of the Great Mountains. The village with its dark tree-tops remains in sight all the way to the canyon.

We only made one trip a day. We'd leave early in the morning and reach the station after noon.

The sun beat down mercilessly, and there was such a crush at the station that it was difficult to make your way through: there were traps and wagons piled high with sacks that had come from all over the valley, there were mules and oxen bringing their loads from the far-off

mountain collective farms. They were driven in by boys and soldiers' wives, black with sunburn, wearing faded clothes, their, bare feet calloused from the stony roads, their lips cracked till they bled from the heat and the dust.

At the grain elevator was a large slogan: "Every ear of corn to the front!" The commotion, jostling and shouting of the drivers in the yard was indescribable. Close by, behind a low wall, a locomotive was manoeuvring into position, throwing out tight knots of hot steam and giving off a smell of burnt slag. Trains thundered by. Camels reluctant to get up from the ground bellowed desperately, angrily opening wide their saliva-filled months.

The mountains of grain at the receiving station were piled high beneath a red-hot iron roof. The sacks had to be carried along sloping wooden planks right under the roof. The air was heavy with the smell of grain, and the dust was choking.

"Hey, you! Watch your step!" the receiving agent with red-rimmed eyes from lack of sleep shouted from below. "Take them up, way up to the top!" He shook his fist and cursed.

Why was he cursing? We knew where to take them and we'd get them there. After all, we had carried the sacks from the very fields where women, old men and children had planted the wheat and reaped it, and now, at the height of the harvesting season, the combine operator was struggling with the old machine that had long since outlived its usefulness, where the women's backs were always bent over their scorching sickles, where children's hands carefully collected each dropped ear of corn.

I still remember how heavy those sacks were. It was a job for a powerful man. I trudged onwards, balancing on the squeaking, sagging boards, a corner of the sack clamped tightly between my teeth to help me carry it, to keep from dropping it. My throat itched from the dust, my ribs ached from the weight, and fiery circles danced before my eyes. Many were the times when I'd begin to feel dizzy, knowing there was no stopping the sack from slipping; my one thought would be to let go of it and go tumbling down after it. But there were others behind me. They were also carrying sacks, they were young boys my age or soldiers' wives who had boys like me. If not for the war, who would ever have permitted them to carry such loads? No, I had no right to retreat when women were doing the same work as 1.

There was Jamila ahead of me; her skirt was tucked up above her knees and I could see the muscles strain on her beautiful tan legs, I

could see what a great effort it was for her to keep her lithe body steady as she bent under the weight of the sack. She would sometimes halt for a second, as if sensing that I was becoming weaker with each successive step.

"Chin up, *kichine bala*, we're nearly there!"

But her own voice sounded hollow and lifeless.

When we had emptied our sacks and turned back, we would see Daniyar coming up. He limped slightly as he walked along the planks in a strong, measured step. As we'd come abreast of him, Daniyar would cast a dark and burning look at Jamila. She would straighten her tired back and pull down her wrinkled dress. Each time he looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time, Jamila continued to ignore him.

It had become a pattern: depending on her mood, Jamila either laughed at him or ignored him completely. We could be riding along, when she'd suddenly shout to me: "Come on, let's go!" With a whoop and swinging the whip over her head, she'd start the horses at a gallop. I would follow. We would overtake Daniyar, smothering him in a heavy cloud of dust which took long to settle on the road again. Though this was done in jest, few men would have tolerated it. But Daniyar seemed not to mind. We'd thunder by while he looked with unsmiling admiration at the laughing Jamila, standing erect in the trap. As I turned back, I would see him gazing at her through the dust. There was something kind and all-forgiving in his look, yet I sensed a stubborn, hidden sadness.

Neither by poking fun at him, nor by ignoring him did she ever make him lose his temper. It was as if he had vowed to bear it all. At first I felt sorry for him and often reproached Jamila: "Why do you make fun of him, *djene?* He's so quiet and meek!"

"Oh!" she would laugh and shrug. "It's all in fun, and nothing will ever happen to such a crab!"

Soon I, too, began to make jokes at his expense. His strange, insistent looks worried me. How he stared as she hoisted a sack on her back! True enough, amidst the noise, the jostling and the market-place commotion of the receiving station, with people hoarse from shouting, dashing back and forth, Jamila's confident, calculated movements and light step, attracted attention, making it seem as if she were somewhere beyond the confines of the yard.

It was difficult not to stop and look at her. In order to take a sack from the edge of the trap, Jamila would stretch up and turn, thrusting

her shoulders forward and throwing her head back in a way that bared her beautiful neck and made her sun-reddened braids nearly touch the ground. Daniyar would stop, as if to rest, but his eyes followed her to the very door. He surely thought that no one noticed him, but I saw everything and disliked what I saw; I even felt insulted, for I could never consider Daniyar worthy of Jamila.

"Just think of it, even he stares at her--then what can you expect from the others!" I fumed. The childish egoism I had not yet outgrown flared up in terrible jealousy. Children always resent their loved ones paying attention to outsiders. Now, instead of feeling sorry for Daniyar, I disliked him so intensely, I was happy when anyone made fun of him.

However, our jokes once ended quite unfortunately. Among the grain sacks there was a huge 280-pound one, made of coarse, raw wool. We usually carried it together, as it was far too heavy to carry alone. One day at the threshing-floor we decided to play a trick on Daniyar. We dumped this huge sack into his trap and piled other sacks on top of it. On the way, Jamila and I stopped off in a Russian village and picked some apples in someone's orchard. We laughed all the way and she threw apples at him. Then, as usual, we overtook him, raising a cloud of dust. He caught up with us beyond the canyon at the railroad crossing, for the barrier was down. From there we drove to the station together. We had completely forgotten about the huge sack and did not think about it until we were through unloading. Jamila nudged me mischievously and nodded towards Daniyar. He was standing in the trap, looking at the sack with some concern, apparently trying to decide what to do with it. Then he looked round, and when he noticed Jamila hiding a smile, he blushed, realising what was up.

"Pull your pants up, or you'll lose them on the way!" Jamila shouted.

Daniyar looked at us angrily; then, before we had time to realise what he was doing, he pulled the sack along the bottom of the trap, set it on the edge, jumped down and, steadying it with one hand, lowered it onto his back. He started walking. At first we made believe there was nothing so special about what he was doing. The others certainly noticed nothing: there was a man carrying a sack--but so was everyone else. When Daniyar approached the gangway, Jamila caught up with him.

"Let go of the sack, I was just fooling!"

"Go away!" he muttered and stepped onto the planks.

"Look, he's carrying it!" Jamila cried, as if trying to .justify herself. She was still laughing softly, but her laughter. was strained, it was as if she were forcing herself to laugh.

We noticed that Daniyar was beginning to limp more markedly. Why hadn't we thought of that before? To this day I cannot forgive myself for that foolish prank. It was I, idiot that I was, who had thought of it!

"Come back!" Jamila shouted, her strange laughter a hollow sound. But Daniyar could not turn back: there were others close behind him.

I can't seem to recall clearly what happened after, that. I saw Daniyar, bent double under the tremendous weight, his head low, his teeth sunk into his lip. He trudged on slowly, moving his wounded leg with care. Each new step apparently caused him such pain that his head jerked back and he would stop for a second. The higher he climbed, the more he swayed. The sack made him stagger. My mouth went dry from fright and shame. Frozen with fear, every fibre of my body felt the weight of his burden and the unbearable pain in his wounded leg. He lurched again, jerked his head back and everything swain before my eyes; everything went black, the earth moved from under my feet.

I came to my senses with a start from a steel-like grip on my hand. I did not immediately recognise Jamila. She was as white as a sheet, her pupils were dilated, her lips still twitched from her recent laughter. By then everyone else, including the receiving agent, had rushed to the foot of the gangway. Daniyar took two more steps. He tried to adjust the sack, and then suddenly began to sink to one knee. Jamila covered her face.

"Let go! Let go of the sack!" she screamed.

But Daniyar would not let go of it, though he could have certainly let it slip over the side, in order not to fell those behind him. At the sound of Jamila's voice, he lurched forward, straightened his leg, took another step, and began to sway again.

"Let go of it, you son-of-a-bitch!" the receiving agent bellowed.

"Let go!" everyone shouted.

Once again Daniyar stood his ground.

"No, he won't let go!" someone whispered with conviction.

Everyone there, both those behind him and those below, realised that he would not let go unless he himself toppled over together with it. There was a dead silence. The locomotive beyond the wall whistled shrilly.

Daniyar trudged onwards, swaying like one in a trance, onwards,

towards the red-hot iron roof, up the sagging boards of the gangway. He stopped every two steps to regain his balance; gathering his strength, he continued on up. Those behind fell in step and stopped when he did. This exhausted them, it drained their last ounce of strength, but no one was angry, no one cursed. They trudged onwards with their burdens, as if tied together by an invisible rope, as if they were treading a dangerous, slippery path, where the life of one depended upon the life of another. There was a single heavy rhythm in their silence and monotonous swaying. One step, another step behind Daniyar, and yet another.

There was just a little left to go, but Daniyar swayed again, his wounded leg would no longer obey him. He would certainly fall if he didn't let go of the sack.

"Run! Support it from behind!" Jamila cried to me, stretching forth her arms helplessly, as if this could somehow help him.

I dashed up the gangway. Elbowing my way through people and sacks, I finally reached him. He looked at me from under his arm. The veins throbbed on his dark, wet forehead, his bloodshot eyes burned through me with hate. I wanted to support the sack from behind.

"Go 'way!" he snapped and moved on.

When he finally came panting and limping down, his arms hung loosely by his sides. The people parted to let him pass, but the receiving agent could not control himself and shouted:

"Are you mad? Don't you think I'm human? Don't you think I'd have let you empty the sack down below? Why do you carry such sacks?"

"That's my business," Daniyar answered quietly.

He spat to a side and walked towards the trap. We did not dare raise our eyes and were ashamed and angry at Daniyar for having taken our foolish prank so seriously.

We rode in silence all night long. Since this was Daniyar's natural state, we couldn't tell whether he was still angry at us or whether he had forgotten the entire incident. But we were conscience-stricken and wretched.

Next morning, as we were loading grain at the threshing-floor, Jamila grabbed the ill-fated sack, stepped firmly on one edge, and ripped it apart.

"Here, take your old rag!" she said, tossing it at the surprised

weigher's feet. "And tell the team-leader not to slip us any more like it!"

"What's the matter with you? What happened?"

"Nothing!"

All the next day Daniyar behaved as quietly and calmly as ever, in no way expressing his feelings, though his limp was more marked, and especially so when he carried a sack. His old wound had apparently re-opened; it was a constant reminder of our guilt. Nevertheless, if he had laughed or joked, it would have put an end to the strain. Jamila, too, pretended that nothing unusual had happened. A proud girl, she laughed as always, but I saw how ill-at-ease she was.

It was late as we journeyed home from the station. Daniyar rode on ahead. The night was magnificent. Who does not know these August nights with their far-off, yet so close, gleaming stars! There was one star: it seemed frozen round the edges, its icy rays sparkled as it looked down from the dark sky in surprise at the earth below. I gazed at it as we rode through the canyon. The horses, eager to be home, trotted briskly and gravel crunched under the wheels. The wind from the steppe brought the bitter smell of flowering wormwood, the faint aroma of cooling ripe wheat, and all this, mingling with the smell of tar and horses' sweat, made our heads light.

To one side dark briar-covered cliffs hung over the road; to the other, from far below, from the thicket of rose-willow and young poplars, the restless Kurkureu rushed on. Now and then a train would thunder over the far bridge; the clatter of its wheels would trail it long after it had vanished in the distance.

It was good to ride in the coolness, to watch the moving backs of the horses, to listen to the sound of the August night and breathe in its smells. Jamila rode ahead of me. She had let go of the reins and was looking about as she sang softly. I knew our silence hung heavily on her. It was impossible to be silent on such a night--it was a night made for singing.

And she began to sing. Perhaps she sang because she was seeking a way to return the former easy spirit of our relationship and because she wanted to dispel her feeling of guilt. She had a ringing, mischievous voice, and she sang the usual village songs: "I'll wave my kerchief as you pass", and "My beloved has gone far away". She knew many songs and sang them simply and with feeling, making it pleasant to listen to her. Suddenly, she stopped and hailed Daniyar:

"Hey, Daniyar, why don't you sing something? Aren't you a

djigit?"

"You sing, Jamila," he answered in some confusion, holding back his horses. "I'm listening, I'm all ears."

"Don't you think we have ears, too? Nobody's forcing you, you don't have to if you don't want to!" And Jamila began to sing again.

Who knows why she had asked him to sing! Perhaps it was just a whim, or perhaps she wanted to draw him into a conversation? It was probably the latter, for soon she shouted again:

"Tell me, Daniyar, were you ever in love?" And she laughed.

He said nothing. Jamila also fell silent.

"She certainly found the right person to ask for a song!" I thought.

The horses slowed down at the little river that crossed the road. Their hooves clattered over the wet, silvery stones. When we had passed the ford, Daniyar whipped his horses and suddenly began to sing in a strained voice that broke at every bump in the road:

My mountains, my blue-white mountains,
The land of my fathers and grandfathers.

Then he faltered, coughed and sang the next two lines in a deep, slightly hoarse baritone:

My mountains, my blue-white mountains,
My cradle of life. . .

Here he stopped again, as if frightened by something, and fell silent.

I imagined his embarrassment quite vividly. However, there was something deeply moving in this halting, timid singing, and he probably had a very good voice: it was difficult to believe that it was Daniyar.

"Well, well!" I exclaimed.

"Why didn't you ever sing before? Sing! Sing as you *really* can!" Jamila cried.

It was light ahead, there the canyon ended. A breeze was blowing from the valley. Daniyar began to sing again. He began as timidly and uncertainly as before, but gradually his voice gained volume, it filled the canyon, resounding and echoing from the far-off cliffs.

I was most amazed by the passion and fire of the song. I did not know what to call it and do not know now; rather, I cannot determine whether it was the voice alone or something bigger, something that came from the soul, something capable of arousing the same emotion

in another, capable of bringing to life one's innermost thoughts.

If I were only able to re-create in some way Daniyar's song! There were hardly any words to it, but without words it revealed a big human heart. Neither before nor after did I ever hear such a song: it was neither Kirghiz nor Kazakh, but there was something of both in it. Daniyar had combined the best melodies of the two related peoples and had curiously woven them into a never-to-be-repeated pattern. This was a song of the mountains and steppes, now soaring like the Kirghiz mountains, now vast and rolling like the Kazakh steppes.

As I listened I became more and more amazed:

"So that's what Daniyar is really like! Who would have ever believed it?"

We were crossing the steppe along the soft, beaten road. Daniyar's voice soared, ever new melodies followed one another with astounding grace. Was he so gifted? What had happened to him? It was as if he had been waiting for this day, for this hour to come!

And suddenly I understood his strangeness which made people shrug and smile--his dreaminess, his love of solitude, his silences. I understood why he spent his evenings on the look-out hill and his nights alone on the river bank, why he was constantly listening to sounds inaudible to others, and why his eyes would suddenly sparkle and his usually drawn eyebrows twitch. This was a person who was deeply in love. And I felt that this was not merely love for another person; this was different, it was a tremendous love--of life, of the earth. Yes, he kept this love within himself, in his music--it was his guiding light. An indifferent person could never have sung as he did, no matter how great his voice.

When it seemed that the last note had died away, a new, haunting wave seemed to waken the dozing steppe, and it listened gratefully to the singer whose dear, native melody was like a caress. The ripe, yellow ash-wheat awaiting harvesting rippled like the surface of a lake, and the first shadows of dawn darted over the field. A mighty regiment of old willows at the mill rustled their leaves, beyond tile river tile camp-fires of the field workers were dying down, and a shadowy rider was galloping silently along the river bank towards the village, now disappearing among the orchards, now reappearing again. The wind was heavy with the smell of apples, the warm, milk-like scent of flowering maize and the smell of drying dung bricks.

Daniyar sang on and on, oblivious to everything, while the enchanted August night listened to him in silence. Even the horses had

long since changed to a walk, as if afraid to break the spell.

Abruptly, on the highest ringing note, Daniyar broke off his song, whooped, and whipped his horses. I thought Jamila would gallop after him and was ready to follow her, but she did not move. She remained sitting with her head inclined, as if listening to the last tremulous notes drifting in the air. Daniyar rode off. Neither of us said a word until we reached the village. There was no need to talk, for words cannot always express all one feels.

It seemed that from that day on a change came over our lives. It was as if I was forever waiting for something wonderful and much desired to happen. In the mornings we would load our traps at the threshing-floor, ride to the station, and hurry to be off again, in order to listen to Daniyar's singing on the way home. His voice had become a part of me, it followed me everywhere, it was with me in the morning as I ran across the wet dewy lucerne to the hobbled horses, the laughing sun rolling out from behind the mountains to greet me. I heard his voice in the soft rustling of the golden rain of wheat, thrown up to the wind by the old winnowers, and in the graceful circling flight of the lonely hawk high above the steppe--in everything that I saw and heard I imagined Daniyar's singing.

As we rode along the canyon in the evenings I felt I was being transported to another world. I would listen to him with my eyes half-closed, and there would arise before me the strangely familiar scenes I had known from childhood: now the soft, smoky-blue clouds of spring would float high above the tents; now herds of horses would gallop across the ringing earth to their summer pastures and the young stallions with long forelocks and wild black fire in their eyes would proudly overtake the mares; now flocks of sheep would slowly spread like lava over the hills; now a water-fall would dash down from a cliff, its white foaming water blinding; now the sun would set softly in the thicket of needle grass beyond the river and the lonely rider on the fiery edge of the horizon seemed in pursuit of it--he need only stretch his hand to touch the sun--and then he, too, would vanish in the thicket and the twilight.

Wide is the Kazakh steppe beyond the river. It had spread the mountains apart to make room for itself and lay stark and desolate between them.

That first memorable summer of war, fires had burned across the steppe, herds of army horses obscured it in clouds of hot dust and riders galloped off in all directions. I remember a Kazakh racing by

along the opposite bank, shouting in a shepherd's guttural voice:

"Kirghizes! Saddle your horses--the enemy has come!" then he disappeared in a cloud of dust and a wave of hot air.

Everyone rose to meet the challenge: a solemn and thundering rumble accompanied our first cavalry divisions as they came down from the mountains and moved across the valleys. Thousands of stirrups jangled, thousands of *djigits* took to the saddle; ahead of them red banners waved on the colour staffs, behind, beyond the dust raised by the horses' hooves, the sorrowful and majestic wail of their mothers and wives throbbed and beat against the ground: "May the steppe protect you! May the spirit of our great warrior Manas protect you!"

Bitter paths remained where the men had gone off to war.

Daniyar's song had opened my eyes to this great world of earthly beauty and suffering. Where had he learned all this? Who had he heard it from? I felt that only a person who had longed for his native land for many years and who had suffered for this love could love it so. As he sang, I visualised him as a small boy, wandering along the roads of the steppe. Perhaps it was then that these songs of his native land had first awakened in his soul? Or was it when he had followed the fiery paths of war?

His song made me want to lie down and embrace the earth, as a son, in gratitude that it was there, that one could love it so. It was then that I felt something new awakening inside of me, something I had no words for, something irresistible, a compulsion to express myself--yes, to express myself, not only to see and sense the world myself, but to make others see my vision, my thoughts and emotions, to tell people of the beauties of our earth as exaltedly as Daniyar could do. I would catch my breath at the fear and joy of something quite unknown, for I did not yet realise my calling in life was painting.

I had always liked to draw. I would copy the illustrations in my textbooks, and the boys all said they were "perfect copies". The teachers praised my drawings for our wall newspaper. But when war broke out, my brothers were called up, I quit school and went to work on the collective farm, as did every other boy my age. I forgot all about paints and brushes and never thought I would think of them again. But Daniyar's songs had stirred my soul. I was in a daze, I looked at the world in bewilderment, as if I were seeing everything for the first time.

As for Jamila, a great change had suddenly come over her. It was as if the lively, sharp-tongued laughing girl had never existed. A shimmering spring sadness clouded her misty eyes. She was constantly

lost in thought on our long rides to the station. A vague, dreamy smile would touch her lips, and she would softly rejoice at something she alone was aware of. Many were the times when she'd stand with a heavy sack on her shoulders, suddenly gripped by a strange timidity, as if she were standing on the bank of a rushing current and did not know whether to cross it or not. She avoided Daniyar and would not look him straight in the face.

Once, at the threshing-floor, Jamila said with a helpless annoyance:

"Take off your shirt--I'll wash it for you."

Then, after she had washed it in the river, she spread it out to dry and sat down beside it, smoothing out the wrinkles carefully, holding it up to the sun to see the worn shoulders, shaking her head and then smoothing it again softly and sadly.

Only once did Jamila laugh loudly and infectiously as before, her eyes shining brightly as they used to. One day a noisy crowd of young women, girls and demobilised *djigits* turned in at the threshing-floor on their way home from stacking lucerne.

"Hey, you *bais,* you're not the only ones who want to eat white bread! Give us some, or we'll throw you into the river!" the *djigits* shouted and thrust out their pitchforks jokingly.

"You can't scare us! I'll find something for the girls, but you can fend for yourselves!" Jamila answered merrily.

"If that's the case, we'll toss you all in!"

The youths and girls began to wrestle. Shouting, screaming and laughing, they tried to push each other into the water.

"Catch them! Pull them in!" Jamila laughed, shouting louder than the rest, skilfully evading her opponents.

Strangely, the *djigits* had eyes only for Jamila. Each tried to catch her, to press her close. Suddenly, three youths grabbed her and carried her to the bank.

"Kiss us, or we'll throw you in!"

"Come on, let's swing her!"

Jamila writhed and wriggled, she laughed and called to her girl-friends for help, but they were running wildly up and down the bank, fishing their kerchiefs out of the water. Jamila flew into the river to the merry laughter of the *djigits.* She emerged with streaming hair, more beautiful than ever. Her wet cotton dress hugged her body, accentuating her lovely round hips and young breasts, but she noticed nothing and laughed, swaying back and forth while streams of water

trickled down her flushed face.

"Kiss us!" the *djigits* persisted.

Jamila kissed them, but again she flew into the water, and again she laughed, throwing back the heavy wet strands of hair from her face.

Everyone at the threshing-floor roared with laughter at the young people's pranks. The old winnowers threw down their spades and wiped the tears from their eyes. The wrinkles on their dark faces shone with joy and with tile spirit of youth revived fleetingly. I, too, laughed heartily, forgetting for once my sacred duty to protect Jamila from the *djigits.*

Daniyar alone was silent. I suddenly noticed him and also stopped laughing. He was a solitary figure at the edge of the threshing-floor, standing there with his feet planted far apart. I had a feeling that he wanted to rush forward and snatch Jamila away from the *djigits.* He stared at her, and his look was one of sadness and admiration in which there was both happiness and pain. Yes, Jamila's beauty was a source of happiness and grief to him. When the *djigits* pressed her close and forced her to kiss each in turn, he would lower his head and make as if to leave, but he would not.

Meanwhile, Jamila had also noticed him. She immediately stopped laughing and hung her head.

"That's enough fooling around!" she suddenly checked the boisterous djigits.

One of them tried to embrace her.

"Go away!" she said, shoving him back. She stole a guilty glance at Daniyar, then ran into the bushes to wring out her dress.

There was much I could not understand in their relationship and, to tell the truth, I was afraid to think about it. Yet, I felt uneasy when I noticed Jamila was sad because she herself was avoiding Daniyar. It would have been better if she had laughed and made fun of him as before. At the same time, however, our trips back to the village at night to the sound of Daniyar's singing inspired me with a strange feeling of happiness for them both.

Jamila rode in the trap when we drove through the canyon, but she would walk alongside it in the steppe. I would, too, for it was nicer to walk along and listen. At first we would each follow our own trap, but soon, without noticing it, a strange force would draw us closer to Daniyar. We wanted to see the expression of his face and eyes--could the singer really be the glum, unsociable Daniyar!

Each time I noticed that Jamila would be both stunned and touched,

that she would slowly stretch her hand towards him, yet he would not see it, for he would be looking far off into the distance, his hands behind his head, swaying from side to side; then Jamila's hand would drop helplessly on the edge of the trap. She would start, jerk it back and stop walking. Standing there in the middle of the road, downcast and stunned, she would follow him with her eyes and then begin walking again.

At times I would think that Jamila and I were both troubled by the same and equally unfathomable feeling. Perhaps the hour had struck, bringing to life a feeling that had long been lying latent in our souls?

Jamila was still able to lose herself in her work, but during those rare moments of rest when we waited around at the threshing-floor, she was terribly restless. She would stand about near the winnowers; sometimes, after tossing several shovels full of wheat high up into the wind with an easy, graceful movement, she would suddenly throw down her spade and walk over to the stacks of straw. Here she would sit down in the shade and, as if afraid to be alone with herself, she would call me:

"Come here, *kichine bala!* Let's sit here together for a while."

I always expected her to tell me something important and explain what it was that was worrying her. But she said nothing. Putting my head in her lap silently and looking off into the distance, she would run her fingers through my bristly hair and gently stroke my face with hot, trembling hands. I looked up at her, at her face, so full of vague anxiety and yearning, and seemed to recognise myself in it. Something was tormenting her, something was gathering and ripening in her soul, demanding an outlet, and she was afraid of it. She painfully desired and, just as painfully, did not wish to admit to herself that she was in love, just as I did and did not want her to love Daniyar. After all, she was my parents' daughter-in-law, my brother's wife.

But such thoughts were fleeting, I drove them from my mind. My greatest joy was to see her tender lips, half-parted as a child's, to see her tear-dimmed eyes. How lovely, how beautiful she was, how inspired and passionate was her face! I sensed this, but could not understand it at the time. Even now I often ask myself: perhaps love produces a feeling of inspiration similar to that experienced by an artist or a poet? Gazing at Jamila, I wanted to run into the. steppe and shout to the heavens and earth, asking them what to do to overcome the strange anxiety and joy that was in me. And once, I think, I found the answer.

As usual, we were returning from the station. Night had fallen, the stars were like swarms of bees in the sky, the steppe was dropping off to sleep, and only Daniyar's song, breaking the stillness, rang out and faded in the soft, distant darkness. Jamila and I followed him.

I don't know what came over Daniyar that night--there was such a deep, tender sadness, such loneliness in his voice that it brought tears of sympathy and compassion to our eyes.

Jamila walked beside his trap, holding on to the side tightly, her head inclined. When Daniyar's voice soared again, she tossed her head, jumped into the trap and sat down beside him. She sat there as if made of stone, her hands folded across her chest. I walked alongside, hurrying forward a bit to have a better look at them. Daniyar continued to sing, talking no notice of Jamila. I saw her arms drop, she leaned towards him and laid her head lightly on his shoulder. For a moment, as a pacer feeling the whip changes his step, his voice wavered, only to resound with greater power than before. He was singing a song of love!

I was astounded. The steppe seemed to blossom, it heaved, drawing apart the darkness, and I saw two lovers in its vast expanse. They did not see me, I did not exist. I walked beside them, watching them sway in rhythm to the song, oblivious to everything in the world. I did not recognise them. It was the same old Daniyar in his shabby soldier's shirt open at the throat, but his eyes seemed to burn in the darkness. It was my own Jamila pressing close to him, so subdued and timid, with teardrops shimmering on her lashes. These were two newly-born people, their happiness was unprecedented. And was this not happiness? Was not Daniyar imparting to her his great love for his native land, one which had created this inspired music? Yes, he was singing for her, he was singing of her.

Once again I was overcome by the strange excitement which Daniyar's singing always aroused in me. Suddenly, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to paint them.

I became frightened at my own thought, but my desire was greater than my fear. I would paint them exactly as they were--lost in happiness! Yes, exactly as they were right then! But would I be able to do it? Fear and joy caught my breath. I walked as one in a trance. I, too, was happy, for I did not yet know how much trouble this rash desire would cause me in the future. I told myself that one should see the earth as Daniyar saw it, that I would use colours to portray his song. I would also have mountains and steppe, people, grasses, clouds and rivers. Then the thought flashed through my mind: but where will I

get the paints? They won't give me any in school, because they need them themselves! As if this were the main problem!

Suddenly Daniyar broke off his song. Jamila had impetuously thrown her arms around him, but had drawn back immediately; she froze for a moment, moved away, and jumped down. Daniyar pulled at the reins hesitantly. The horses stopped. Jamila was standing in the road with her back towards him. Then she tossed her head, looked at him sideways, and said through her tears:

"What are you looking at?" After a moment's pause, she added harshly: "Don't look at me, keep on going!" and went over to her own trap. "What are you gaping at?" she shouted at me. "Get in, and pick up your reins! Oh, you make me sick!"

"What came over her?" I wondered, urging on the horses. It was not difficult to guess though: she was greatly distressed, for she was married and her husband was living, he was in a hospital in Saratov. I refused to puzzle it out. I was angry at her and angry at myself; perhaps, I would have really begun to hate her if I had known that Daniyar would sing no more, that I would never hear his voice again.

My whole body ached, I could not wait to get back and fall into the hay. The trotting horses' backs joggled in the dark, the trap rattled unbearably, the reins kept slipping from my hands.

Back at the threshing-floor I barely managed to pull off the harness and throw it under the trap. I collapsed in a heap as soon as I reached the hay. This time Daniyar led the horses out to pasture.

Next morning I awoke with joy. I would paint Jamila and Daniyar. I closed my eyes tight and imagined exactly how I would portray them. All I needed was paint and brushes and I could begin.

I ran to the river, washed and then ran to the hobbled horses. The cold, wet lucerne slapped loudly against my bare legs, it stung the cracked skin of my soles, but I felt wonderful. As I ran, I took note of everything that was going on around me. The sun was emerging from behind the mountains and a sunflower that had somehow taken root near the irrigation ditch stretched towards it. White-topped knapweed crowded round it greedily, but it stood firm, catching the morning sun, snatching it from them with its yellow tongues and nourishing its tight and heavy cap of seeds. There the water trickled down the wagon tracks where the wheels had churned up the mud at the crossing. There was a lavender island of fragrant, waist-high mint. I was running across my native soil, swallows raced on overhead--ah! If only I had the paints to capture the morning sun, the blue-white mountains, the dew-

drenched lucerne, and the lonely sunflower growing at the edge of the ditch.

When I returned to the threshing-floor, my happy mood was immediately clouded. I saw Jamila. She was depressed, her face was pinched, and there were dark rings under her eyes; she had probably spent a sleepless night. She neither smiled nor spoke to me, but when Orozmat appeared, Jamila went up to him and said:

"Take your old trap back! Send me any place you want, but I won't deliver grain to the station any more!"

"What's the matter, child? Did a horsefly bite you?" he asked in a surprised and kindly voice.

"Horseflies bite calves! And don't ask me why! I said I won't go, and that's all there is to it!"

The smile disappeared from Orozmat's face.

"I don't care what you want! You'll do your job all the same!" He banged his crutch on the ground. "If someone's offended you, tell me and I'll break this crutch over his head! But if not, stop playing the fool: it's soldiers' bread you're delivering, and your own husband is out there!" He turned sharply and hobbled away.

Jamila was embarrassed, she blushed and then sighed softly as she looked at Daniyar. He stood off to a side with his back to her, tightening the hame-strap on the horse's collar with jerky movements. He had heard their conversation. For a while Jamila remained standing where she was, fingering her whip. Then she shrugged recklessly and walked towards her trap.

That day we returned earlier than usual. Daniyar raced his horses all the way. Jamila was silent and gloomy, while I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the scorched and blackened steppe before me. Why, only yesterday it had been so different. It was as if I had heard about it in a fairy-tale, and the picture of happiness that had awakened my consciousness would not leave me for a moment. I had grasped the brightest edge of life, recreating it in my imagination in its every detail until it alone enveloped my every thought. I could not rest until I had stolen a piece of heavy white paper from the weigher. I ran off and hid behind a haystack. There, with my heart thumping in my throat, I laid it on the smooth wooden back of a spade which I had picked up on my way.

"Thc blessings of Allah be upon it!" I whispered, as my father had once done when putting me on a horse for the first time. Then I touched the paper with my pencil. These were my first untutored lines.

But when Daniyar's features appeared on the sheet, I forgot everything else. I imagined the August steppe at night, I imagined that I heard his song and saw him with his head thrown back and his throat bare, I saw Jamila leaning against his shoulder. There was the trap and the two of them, there were the reins thrown over the front of the trap, the horses' backs joggling in the darkness, and beyond that, the steppe and the far-away stars.

I was so engrossed in my work that I did not hear a thing and started when I heard someone's voice over me.

"Are you deaf?"

It was Jamila. I was embarrassed and blushed, but was not quick enough in hiding my drawing.

"The traps are all loaded and we've been shooting for you this past hour! What are you doing here? What's this?" she asked, picking up the drawing. "Hm!" she shrugged angrily.

I wished I were dead. She kept looking at the drawing for a long, long time and finally raised her sad, moist eyes to me.

"Give it to me, *kichine bala.* I'll put it away as a remembrance," she said softly. Folding the sheet, she tucked it inside her blouse.

We were already on the road, yet I could not come back to reality. It all seemed a dream. I could not believe that I had drawn something resembling that which I had seen. Yet, somewhere deep in my heart there grew a naive feeling of triumph, even pride, and dreams one more daring than the next, one more enticing than the next, made my head swim. I now wanted to do many more pictures. These would be paintings, not pencil drawings. I paid no attention to our fast pace. It was Daniyar who was racing his horses. Jamila did not fall behind. She kept looking about, at times she would smile in a touching, self-conscious way. I also smiled, for it meant she was no longer angry at us, and if she would ask him to, Daniyar would sing again that evening.

That day we arrived at the station much earlier than usual, and our horses were in a lather. No sooner had we pulled up the traps than Daniyar began unloading. What had come over him? Why was he in such a rush? From time to time he would stop and follow the trains thundering by with a long, thoughtful gaze. Jamila followed his gaze in an effort to understand what he was thinking about.

"Come here, this horse-shoe's loose. Help me pull it off," she called to him.

When Daniyar had pried it off the hoof he was holding between his

knees and had straightened up, Jamila looked into his eyes and asked softly:

"What's the matter? Don't you understand? Or am I the only girl in the world?"

Daniyar looked away and did not answer.

"Do you think it's easy on me?" she sighed.

Daniyar's eyebrows twitched, he gazed at her with love and sadness and replied so quietly I could not hear his words; then he quickly walked back to his trap, looking rather pleased. He stroked the horse-shoe as he walked.

What consolation could he have found in Jamila's words? And could a person find consolation if one sighed heavily and said: "Do you think it's easy on me?"

We were through with the unloading and were ready to leave, when a gaunt, wounded soldier in a creased greatcoat with a knapsack slung over his shoulder entered the yard of the receiving station. A few minutes before a train had pulled in. The soldier looked round and shouted:

"Is there anyone here from Kurkureu village?"

"I'm from Kurkureu!" I answered, wondering who the man could be.

"Whose boy are you?" the soldier asked, walking towards me. Suddenly he saw Jamila, and a surprised and happy grin spread over his face.

"Kerim? Is it you?" she cried.

"Jamila, my dear!" he shouted and squeezed her hand tightly in his.

He was her fellow-villager.

"What luck! It certainly was lucky that I looked in here!" he said excitedly. "I just left Sadyk, we were in the hospital together, and with Allah to protect him, he'll be out in a month or two. When I was ready to leave I told him to write his wife a letter and promised to deliver it. Here it is, signed and sealed." Kerim handed her a triangular envelope.

Jamila snatched it, blushed, then blanched and looked at Daniyar, cautiously from the corner of her eye. He stood beside the trap. As that day at the threshing-floor, he was a lonely figure standing beside the trap, his eyes full of wild despair as he looked straight at her.

By then people began gathering from all sides; the soldier discovered his friends and relations in the crowd, he was bombarded with questions. Before Jamila had a chance to thank him for the letter, Daniyar's trap clattered by, flew out of the yard and, raising a cloud of

dust, went bumping along the rutted road.

"He must be crazy!" the people shouted.

The soldier had been led away by the crowd, while Jamila and I remained standing in the middle of the yard, looking at the fast-disappearing cloud of dust.

"Come on, *djene," I* said.

"You go on, leave me alone!" she said bitterly.

Thus, for the first time, each of us rode back alone. The stifling heat burned my parched lips. The cracked, scorched earth that had turned white from the heat of the day seemed to be cooling off and was becoming covered with salty grey flakes. The unsteady, formless sun shimmered in the salty white mist. There, above the dim horizon, orange-red storm clouds were gathering. Blasts of dry wind deposited white dust on the horses' muzzles, it waved their manes and passed on, rippling the clumps of wormwood on the hillocks.

"It looks as though it is going to rain," I thought.

I felt so lonely and anxious! I whipped my horses on, for they kept slowing down to a walk. Skinny, long-legged bustards scampered past into the ravine. Withered burdock leaves were swept along the road; no burdocks grow on our lands, they had been blown over from the Kazakh side. The sun went down. There was not a soul in sight, nothing save the heat-exhausted steppe.

It was dark when I reached the threshing-floor. Thc air was still and windless. I called to Daniyar.

"He's gone to the river," the watchman answered. "It's so close, everyone's gone home. There's nothing to do at a threshing-floor if there's no wind!"

I led the horses out to pasture and decided to go down to the river. I knew Daniyar's favourite place near the Cliff.

He was sitting there, hunched over, his head resting on his knees, and listening to the rushing water below. I wanted to walk up to him, put my arm around him and say something comforting. But what could I say? I stood off to a side and finally turned back. After that I lay for a long time on the straw, looking up at the cloud-darkened sky and wondering why life was so complicated and so difficult to understand.

Jamila had not yet returned. What could have happened to her? I could not fall asleep, though I was dead tired. Lightning flashed in the cloud banks high over the mountains.

When Daniyar came back to the threshing-floor I was still awake. He wandered about aimlessly, keeping a watchful eye on the road.

Then he slumped down on the straw near by. I was certain he would leave, that he would never remain in the village! But where could he go? Alone and homeless, he had no one waiting for him. As I was dozing off I heard the slow clatter of an approaching trap. It was probably Jamila returning.

I don't know how long I had been sleeping when I felt the straw rustle at my ear. Someone passed, and it seemed as if a wet wing brushed my shoulder. I opened my eyes. It was Jamila. She had come from the river, her dress was cool and damp. She stopped, looked round anxiously, and sat down beside Daniyar.

"Daniyar, I've come, I've come to you myself," she said softly.

All was silence. A bolt of lightning slipped earthward soundlessly.

"Are you angry? Are you very angry?"

Silence again. Then came the soft splash of a clump of loosened soil sliding into the water.

"Is it my fault? And it's not your fault, either."

Thunder rolled over the mountains. Jamila's profile was clearly etched in a flash of lightning. She clung to Daniyar. Her shoulders heaved convulsively within his embrace. Then she stretched out on the straw beside him.

A hot wind blew in from the steppe. It whirled the straw about, it crashed into a dilapidated tent at the edge of the threshing-floor and spun off like a crazy top down the road. Once again there was the dry crack of thunder and blue flashes pierced the clouds. It was both frightening and exciting--a storm was coming, the last storm of summer.

"Did you think I would prefer him to you?" Jamila whispered passionately. "Never, never, never! He never loved me. He even sent me his regards as a postscript. I don't need him or his love that has come too late, and I don't care what people will say! My lonely darling, I'll never let you go! I've loved you for a long time. I loved you and waited for you even before I knew you and you came, as if you knew that I was waiting for you! "

Crooked light-blue flashes of lightning plunged into the river near the cliff. Slanting icy raindrops pattered on the straw.

"Jamila, my beloved Jamila!" Daniyar whispered, calling her by every loving Kazakh and Kirghiz name. "I, too, have loved you for a long time. I dreamed of you in the trenches and I knew that my love was in my native land. It was you, my Jamila! Turn round and let me look into your eyes!"

The storm was upon us.

The felt covering was wrenched off the tent and flapped like a wounded bird. The rain, whipped from below by the wind, came down in torrents and seemed to be kissing the earth. Peals of thunder rolled across the sky like an avalanche. Bright flashes of lightning illuminated the mountains, the wind howled and raged in the ravine.

It was pouring. I lay hidden in the straw, feeling my own heart racing in my breast. I was happy. I felt as one who has come out into the sunshine after a long illness. Both the rain and the flashes of lightning reached me beneath the straw, but I was content and fell asleep with a smile, uncertain of whether the sound I heard was the subsiding rustling in the straw or Daniyar and Jamila whispering.

The rainy season was close at hand. It would soon be autumn. There was the damp autumn smell of wormwood and wet straw in the air. What awaited us in the autumn? For some reason or other, I did not think about that then.

That autumn, after a two-year break, I went back to school. After lessons were over I often came to the steep river bank and sat beside the now dead and deserted threshing-floor. Here I drew my first sketches. I recall that even then I realised my work was far from good.

"These paints are no good! If only I had *real* paints!" I would say, though I had no idea of what "real" paints should be like. It was not until much later that I discovered the existence of real oil paints in little tubes. Be that as it may, my teachers were right it seemed: I needed tutoring. However, it was only a dream, for there was still no word from my brothers, and my mother would never have let me, her only son and the *djigit* and breadwinner of two families, go away to study. I dared not even bring up the subject. As if to make things harder for me the autumn that year was so beautiful, it cried to be painted.

The icy Kurkureu became shallow, the tops of the stones at the rapids were covered with dark-green and orange moss. The tender, naked stems of the rose-willows appeared red in the early frosts, but the small poplars still retained their firm, short yellow leaves.

The smoky, rain-drenched herdsmen's tents were black spots on the reddish after-grass of the flood-meadow; ribbons of acrid blue smoke curled over the smoke holes. The lean stallions whinnied loudly, the mares were drifting away and it would be difficult to keep them in herds till the spring. Flocks of cattle that had come down from the mountains wandered over the stubble. The dry, darkened steppe was criss-crossed by trampled paths.

Soon the steppe wind began to blow, the sky became muddy and the cold rains, the forerunners of snow, began. One fairly pleasant day I went down to the river, attracted by a fiery bush of mountain ash growing on a sandbar. I sat down among the rose-willows, not far from the ford. Evening was falling. Suddenly I saw two people. They had probably crossed the ford. They were Daniyar and Jamila. I could not tear my eyes from their tense, yet determined faces. Daniyar had a knapsack slung over his shoulder; he walked quickly, and the flaps of his open greatcoat hit against the tops of his worn tarpaulin boots. Jamila had tied a white kerchief around her head and it had slid back. She wore her best print dress, the one she liked to show off in during Fair days, and a quilted corduroy jacket over it. In one hand she carried a small bundle and hung on to a strap of Daniyar's knapsack with the other. They were talking.

They followed the path across the ravine through the thicket of needle grass. I watched them, not knowing what to do. Should I call to them? But I could not utter a sound.

The last crimson rays slipped over the quick-moving clouds above the mountain range, and it began to get dark fast. Daniyar and Jamila never once turned back as they walked towards the railroad siding. Their heads bobbed in the thicket once or twice and then disappeared completely.

"Jamila-a-a-a!" I shouted at the top of my voice.

"A-a-a!" came the forlorn echo.

"Jamila-a-a-a!" I shouted again and ran after them madly across the river.

Sprays of icy drops hit my face. My clothes were drenched, but I ran on, not seeing the ground beneath my feet. Then I tripped and fell. I lay there without raising my head with the hot tears streaming down my face. The darkness seemed to weigh down upon my shoulders. I could hear the thin stems of needle grass wailing mournfully.

"Jamila! Jamila!" I sobbed.

I was saying good-bye to the two people closest and dearest to me. And as I lay there on the ground I suddenly realised that I loved Jamila. Yes, she was my first love, the love of my childhood.

I lay there for a long time, my head buried in my wet arm. I was saying good-bye to more than Jamila and Daniyar--I was saying good-bye to my childhood.

When I finally straggled home at dark, there was a great commotion in the yard; stirrups jangled, people were saddling their

horses, and a drunken Osmon was prancing about on his steed, bellowing at the top of his voice:

"We should've chased that stray mongrel from the village long ago! It's a disgrace to our whole kin! If I ever lay eyes on him, I'll kill him on the spot! And I don't care if I'm jailed for it--I won't permit every passing tramp to steal our women! Come on, *djigits,* he won't get away, we'll catch him at the station!"

My blood froze: which road would they take? But once I was sure they had taken the highroad to the station and not the one to the siding, I slipped into the house and curled up under my father's sheepskin coat, covering my head so no one could see my tears.

How much talk and gossip there was in the village after that! The women vied with each other in condemning Jamila.

"She's a fool to have left such a family and trampled her happiness!"

"I wonder what attracted her to this pauper?"

"Don't worry, the little beauty will come to her senses, but it'll be too late then."

"That's what I say! And what's wrong with Sadyk? Isn't he a good husband and provider? Why, he's the best *djigit* in the village!"

"And what about her mother-in-law? It's not many who have a mother-in-law like that! You'd have to look far and wide for another such *baibiche!* The little fool has ruined her life for no good reason at all!"

Perhaps I was the only one who did not condemn Jamila, my former *djene.* I, for one, knew that in his soul Daniyar was richer than any of us. No, I could not believe that Jamila would be unhappy with him. But I felt sorry for my mother. It seemed that when Jamila left, her former strength abandoned her also. She looked forlorn and haggard, and, as I now realise, she could not accept the fact that Fate could break all the old patterns so forcefully. If a great tree is uprooted by a storm it will never rise again. Before, my mother's pride would never have permitted her to ask anyone to thread a needle for her. But one day I came home from school and saw that her hands were trembling, that she could not see the needle's eye and was weeping.

"Here, thread it for me," she asked and sighed heavily. .Jamila will come to no good end. Ah, what a housekeeper she would have made! But she's gone. She's renounced us. Why did she go? Was she so badly off here?"

I wanted to embrace my mother and reassure her, to tell her what

sort of a person Daniyar really was, but I did not dare to, for I would have insulted her terribly.

But one day the innocent part I had played in the whole affair ceased to be a secret.

Soon Sadyk returned. Naturally, he grieved, though when drunk he said to Osmon:

"Good riddance, if she's gone! She'll die in the gutter someplace. There's enough women to go around. Even a golden-haired one isn't worth the puniest of fellows."

"Sure!" Osmon answered. "I'm just sorry I didn't catch him, 'cause I would've killed him on the spot! And as for her, I'd have tied her hair to my horse's tail! They've probably gone south, to the cotton farms, or else to the Kazakhs. It's not the first time he's tramped about! But I just can't get it through my head--how could it have happened in the first place? Nobody knew a thing, and who would have ever suspected it? The bitch fixed it all up herself! If I could only lay my hands on her!"

I felt like saying: "You can't forget how she slighted you, back in the field. What a mean and petty soul you have!"

One day I was sitting at home, doing a picture for our school newspaper. My mother was fussing about the stove. Suddenly, Sadyk burst into the room, He was pale and his eyes were narrowed viciously as he ran up to me and shoved a piece of paper in my face.

"Did you do this?"

I was struck dumb. It was my first drawing. Daniyar and Jamila seemed alive as they looked at me from the sheet of paper.

"Yes, I did."

"Who's this?" he said, poking the page.

"Daniyar."

"Traitor!" Sadyk screamed.

He tore the drawing to bits and stamped out, banging the door behind him.

After a long and depressing silence my mother asked:

"Did you know about it?"

"Yes."

She stood there, leaning against the stove, looking at me with dismay and reproach. And when I said: "I'll draw them again!" she shook her head sadly.

I looked at the scraps of paper lying on the floor, a hurt I could not endure choking me. Let them think I was a traitor. Whom had I betrayed? My family? My kin? But I had not betrayed the truth of life,

the truth of these two people! I could not say this, for even my own mother would not understand.

Everything swam before my eyes, it seemed that the bits of paper were alive and moving about the floor. The memory of Daniyar and Jamila looking at me from the paper was so vivid that suddenly I seemed to hear Daniyar's song, the one he had sung that memorable August night. Recalling their departure from the village, an irresistible desire to take to the road rose within me. I would go as they had, firmly and courageously, to enter upon the difficult road to happiness.

"I want to go away to study. Tell my father. I want to be an artist!" I said to my mother.

I was certain that she would begin to reproach me and weep, recalling my brothers who had died in the war. But, to my surprise, she did not weep. She said softly and sadly:

"If that's what you want to do. My fledglings have all grown strong and are flying off in their own directions. How are we to know how high you'll fly? Perhaps you're right. Go then. Maybe you'll change your mind when you get there. Drawing and smearing paint is no trade. You'll study and find out if it's so. And don't forget us."

From that day the Small House separated from us. Soon after I left to study.

That's all there is to the story.

After I graduated from art school I was recommended for the Academy, and my diploma work was a painting I had dreamed of for many years.

It is not difficult to guess that it was a painting of Daniyar and Jamila. They are seen walking along the autumn road across the steppe. Before them is the vast and bright horizon.

Though my painting is not perfect--for skill does not come all at once--I treasure it, for it is my first truly creative experience.

There are times when I am dissatisfied with my work. There are difficult moments when I lose faith in myself. At such times I am drawn to this painting that has become so dear to me, to Daniyar and Jamila. I gaze at them and each time speak to them.

"Where are you now, what roads are you treading? We have many new roads in the steppe across Kazakhstan, up to the Altai and through Siberia! Many brave people are working there. Perhaps you, too, are there? My Jamila, you left with never a backward glance. Perhaps you are tired, perhaps you have lost faith in yourself? Lean against Daniyar, let him sing you his song of love, of the earth, of life. May the steppe

reflect it and blossom in every hue and colour! May you recall that August night! Keep on, Jamila, never regret what you've done, for you have found your difficult happiness!"

As I look at them I hear Daniyar's voice. He is calling to me to set out, and that means it is time for me to prepare for the journey. I will cross the steppe to my native village and will find new colours there.

May my every brush-stroke resound with Daniyar's song! May my every brush-stroke echo the sound of Jamila's beating heart!

1958

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Articles by Iraj Bashiri:
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The Art of Chingiz Aitmatov's Stories
Aitmatov's Jamila: An Analysis
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