

Bazaar Chubar

AIKOKUL TURSUNBEK KYZY

from On Eki Chakryym (Twelve Kilometres)

I. GREEN WALNUTS

The first sack came down from Arslanbob in the second week of August, on the back of a Kamaz loaded with apricot crates. The driver left it in the gate without coming in, because a driver with a full load does not come in for tea, and he called up to the house only that it was from Kuchkar *aka*, from the kuda, for the bride.

Zuhra knew what it was before she untied it. It smelled of the forest. That sharp, green, bitter smell is the one that clings to the inside of your nose for a week after the harvest and makes the whole bazaar smell of the hills. The nuts had fallen early, a month before their time, and they still wore their green coats, split here and there where they had hit the ground.

"He's showing off," said her grandmother from the bench under the vine. "In my day they sent the bride a scarf."

"In your day they sent you a goat, Chong-ene."

"They sent me a goat," said Kumushay, pleased. "And I sent it back with a ribbon on its horn, because it was a bad goat."

There was no sense in leaving them in the sack to rot. Zuhra sat in the shade of the warehouse with a basin between her knees and a knife and husked them one by one, as she had done every autumn since she could hold a knife. The green coats came off in curls. Under them the shells were pale and wet like a newborn's skull. She laid them out on the flat roof to dry, in rows, and it was only when she came down the ladder and went to wash that she saw her hands.

Black to the wrist. The walnut juice does that. It goes in under the skin and stays there for ten days, no matter what you do, and every child in the Kara-Unkur valley has gone to school in September with black hands and been laughed at by the children of the cotton farms.

Her grandmother saw it at the same moment and made the small noise in her throat that she used for spilled milk and for cattle crossing the road.

"Six weeks," Kumushay said. "Six weeks to the toi and you've dipped your hands in Morkhan's ink."

"It washes out."

"It washes out," her grandmother agreed, in the tone she used to say the opposite. She went into the kitchen and came back with a bowl of sour milk and made Zuhra sit and put her hands in it, and she sat beside her and held Zuhra's wrists down in the milk as if they might escape, and she said a short prayer under her breath in the church words that Zuhra had never learned, the words from the hamlet of Örüktü where Kumushay had been born a Christian and from which she had come down to the bazaar in 1961 to marry a Muslim walnut buyer, and no one at the time had made very much of it.

The milk did nothing. They both knew it would do nothing. But Zuhra sat there with her hands in it until the sun went off the yard, because it was easier than arguing, and because her grandmother's hands on her wrists were warm.

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The kuda had been made in May, when the walnut trees were in flower and the whole valley above Arslanbob smelled of it. People say the walnut flower has no smell. People who say this have never stood in the forest in May.

Her father had driven them up the valley road in the Niva: Zuhra, her mother, Chong-ene in the front seat because of her hip, and two aunts squeezed in the back with the gifts. There had been no line then. There had been the road, and a police post at the bridge with a single bored policeman, which had been there since Soviet times and

which nobody thought about, and then the road went on climbing between the orchards, and the air got cooler, and the houses got further apart and older, and the people at the roadside stalls stopped speaking Uzbek to each other and spoke Iradi instead, or the mixture of the two that the valley speaks.

Kuchkar *aka's* house stood on a terrace above the river with a walnut tree in the yard so old that its trunk had split and been bound with an iron band, like a barrel. They had sat on the *tör* on the felt, and there had been tea and then kymyz, which her father drank and her mother pretended to drink, and then plov. Kuchkar's wife had put the earrings in Zuhra's ears with her own hands. The men had talked about the kalym at the far end of the room in low voices, the way men discuss a price, which is what it was. Her father had come down the valley that evening as the owner of a grey riding mare, eleven sheep to be delivered after the summer pasture, and four hundred dollars. On the bride's side the *sep* was settled: two shyrdaks, one of them her grandmother's own from Örüktü, cut in the old pattern that the hamlet women call "Janyl's flower", and the bedding, and a carved chest.

And Alisher had walked her to the falls.

That was allowed. They were promised; his younger sister came with them, a few paces behind, and made a great show of looking at the birds. He was twenty-four. He guided foreigners up to the falls in summer for one of the guesthouses and spoke English with a German accent he had learned from them, and he had a way of saying nothing for a long time and then saying something exactly. At the bottom of the big fall, where the spray made the air cold, he had said, without looking at her: "Your father buys our walnuts for half what they're worth."

"Two-thirds," she had said.

He had laughed then, and looked at her. "Two-thirds," he had agreed. "Well. Now it's in the family."

They had all talked about the Bill of Sale that day, all the men, on both sides of the room. It was May. In February the papers had come out in Nurzhan: Orozbekov's ministers had been drawing up the treaties with Tashkent, and Bishkek, and Astana, cutting Irad up like a sheep, and the Fergana rim, their rim, their bazaar and their hills both, was to go to Uzbekistan. The men had cursed Orozbekov from one end of the felt to the other, highland and lowland together. Kuchkar had said that if the ministers in Talas wanted to sell the Chubar they would have to come up the valley and fetch them. Her father had said that the Uzbek customs men already took enough from him without being made his government. They had laughed together, and agreed, and drunk to the Front. Alisher's cousin had ridden north with the Talas Alatau clans in March. Everyone had a cousin who had ridden north.

On the fourth of June, when the radio said the Front had taken Talas and that Orozbekov had signed his resignation in the hands of tribal commanders, her father had shut the shop for an hour and stood in the walnut rows with the other traders and listened, and old Mamadaliev had wept openly and said *Alhamdulillah*. It was the last day, Zuhra thought afterwards, that the valley had been one valley.

II. SUNDAY

The elders met on the third Sunday in August, which was market day, because on market day everyone was in town anyway and nobody had to explain why he had come.

The livestock market at Bazar-Korgon is the biggest in the south. On a Sunday morning it fills the whole flat ground beyond the river with sheep and goats and horses, and with the trucks and trailers

that brought them, and with men in *kalpaks* and men in caps and men in nothing at all on their heads, Uzbek and Kyrgyz and Iradi, from the farm belt and from the hills and from Jalal-Abad across the frontier, haggling in three languages and the mixture of all of them. The cattle are kept at the far end, by the old railway siding. That is not a rule. It is just where they have always been kept, so that the Christian families from the hamlets can buy sheep without walking past them. Her grandmother had never in her life gone to the far end of the livestock market.

The elders' council met in the room above the *chaikhana* at the head of the walnut rows, where they had met since before the war and, people said, since before the Russians: a long room with carpets on the floor and the windows open to the noise. Zuhra carried the tea up. She did it because her cousin who usually did it had gone to Osh to sit her exams, and because her father had looked at her that morning and said, "You'll carry the tea," in a voice she had not heard from him before. She had understood that he wanted her in the room, and that he did not want to say why.

So she was there. She knelt at the side by the samovar, refilling the bowls, with her black hands, which had faded to the colour of strong tea, hidden as well as she could manage in the cloth.

Abdumalik Mamadaliev spoke first, because he always spoke first. He was not the oldest in the room but he was the richest, and the oldest, Haji Toktosun *ata*, was deaf and had long ago given up the habit of speaking first. Mamadaliev was fifty-five then, a big, slow man with a trader's hands, and he had bought walnuts from Kuchkar's father and from Kuchkar's father's father, and he had a way of making whatever he wanted sound like a thing that had already happened and was only being reported.

He said that the Front had gone back to the hills. He said this without blame: the Front was the clans, and the clans had done what

the clans had always done, which was to come down, break what needed breaking and go home to their pastures. Good. But the Front was not in Bazar-Korgon. The Front was not at the bridge. The Uzbek frontier was four kilometres to the south and there were men on the other side of it who had read the same papers the rest of them had read, and who knew which piece of the sheep had been promised to Tashkent. He said there had been Uzbek border guards on the Sopol-Tepa road on Thursday, inside the line of the old district, buying cigarettes. Perhaps they were only buying cigarettes.

He said that in Talas and Nurzhan and Tash-Kömür there was now a government. Not the government that had sold them. The other one. The one that had read out the papers and stopped the sale. That government had a Gendarmerie in Tash-Kömür, a day's drive away, and it had trucks, and it had a road. He said that he had spoken to people in Tash-Kömür. He said that the people in Tash-Kömür would come if they were asked.

"Asked by whom?" said someone near the window.

"By us," said Mamadaliev. "By this room."

The man by the window was Rahmatulla, who kept the honey stall and had a brother in Kyzyl-Unkur. He said: "This room is half the clan."

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

Zuhra filled the bowls. She was watching her father, who was sitting four places down from Mamadaliev with his hands on his knees, looking at the carpet. He had not spoken. Her father, Abdukadyr, was a man who spoke a great deal at home and very little in rooms like this one. The whole bazaar knew him by the name on the shop sign and in the ledgers, Yusupov, the way the Soviet clerks had written it down for his own father; in the hills, and on the felt at Kuchkar's house, he was Abdukadyr Yusup uulu. He

answered to both names. It had never occurred to Zuhra before that morning that a man might have to choose between them.

They talked for three hours. That is how it is done. Every man who wanted to speak spoke, and some spoke twice, and nobody interrupted except Haji Toktosun, who did not know he was interrupting. They talked about the Uzbek border guards and about water: the canals that fed the cotton fields came off the Kara-Unkur below the town, and the river came down from the hills, and the hills belonged to whoever held them. They talked about the Bill of Sale. They talked about what it meant to ask the people in Tash-Kömür to come, and whether once asked they would ever leave, and whether that mattered. They talked about Döölötbek Ashym uulu, the *biy*, who was up at Arslanbob and had not been consulted, and someone said he had been sent word, and someone else said word was not the same as consulting, and Mamadaliev said that the *biy* would be told what the room decided, which was a thing he could have said more gently.

Near the end, the honey man Rahmatulla said what everyone in the room had been thinking for three hours.

"You'll make us bazaar Chubar," he said. "That's what they'll call us up there. Not Chubar. Bazaar Chubar. The ones who sold the hills for a road to Tash-Kömür."

Mamadaliev looked at him for a while.

"They can call us what they like," he said. "They'll still bring their walnuts down to sell to us."

And nobody in the room laughed, because it was true.

They did not vote. Elders don't vote. Mamadaliev put it in the form of a question, the sense of the room, and he went round the room, and each man said yes, or said yes with a condition, or said nothing, which was counted, by long custom, as yes. Rahmatulla said

no. Two others said no. Haji Toktosun was asked twice and said that it was very hot.

When Mamadaliev came to her father, Abdukadyr lifted his eyes from the carpet and looked, not at Mamadaliev, but at Zuhra kneeling by the samovar with the teapot in her stained hands. He looked at her for long enough that two of the men followed his eyes to see what he was looking at.

Then he said: "Yes."

She did not drop the teapot. Afterwards she was proud of that.

III. THE ROAD UP

The trucks came on the Thursday.

There were six of them, olive-drab Kamazes with canvas backs, the kind the territorial defence forces had driven in American times, and two Land Cruisers in front with blue lights that nobody switched on. They came along the foot of the hills from the direction of Tash-Kömür, raising a cloud that could be seen from the roof of the warehouse half an hour before they arrived, and half the town went out to the Tash-Kömür road to watch them come in. Some people clapped. Some boys ran beside the trucks. An old woman Zuhra knew from the dried-fruit rows held up a round of bread to a gendarme in the back of the second truck, and he leaned down and took it and touched it to his forehead, and the people near her cheered. Others stood at the roadside with their arms folded and said nothing. Zuhra stood on the roof of the warehouse with Chong-ene, who had insisted on climbing the ladder, hip or no hip, and who watched the trucks go by with her lips pressed together.

"Jandarm," her grandmother said, the way you would name a disease.

"They've come because we asked them."

“Yes,” said Kumushay. “That’s the worst way for them to come.”

The gendarmes set up at the bridge where the valley road leaves the town and starts to climb into the hills, the same bridge where the bored policeman had sat since Soviet times. The bored policeman was gone. In his place, by the end of the first week, there was a barrier made of a painted pole on an oil drum, a hut of sandbags, a radio mast and a tent. There were young men in uniforms that did not fit, who spoke Russian among themselves and Talas Iradi to the townspeople, and who looked at the hills above the bridge the way you look at a dog you have been told does not bite. Their captain was a Russian, or half-Russian, from Nurzhan, named Gorbunov. He bought his cigarettes at the shop next to her father’s and was very polite and paid for everything, and the shopkeeper’s wife said that he looked at his own men as if he expected each of them to steal something, and that this was a good sign in a captain.

On the second evening Zuhra climbed onto the roof with the telephone, because the roof was the only place in the house where the signal from the Kyrgyz towers across the frontier reached, and she called Alisher.

He answered on the first ring. That told her he had been waiting.

“The elders met at Arslanbob-Ata,” he said, without saying hello. “Yesterday. At the shrine. The *biy* and all the elders from the upper valley, and from Kyzyl-Unkur, and some from Mailuu-Suu.”

“And?”

“And they said no.” There was a long noise on the line, the hiss the Kyrgyz towers make. “They said the Chubar went with the Front in March and they stay with the Front. They said that if Bazar-Korgon wants a Gendarmerie, Bazar-Korgon can have one, but there won’t be any Gendarmerie in the valley. They’re sending riders to the bridge.”

“To the bridge? Here?”

"To the top of the bridge. Above it. Where the road leaves the orchards." He paused. "The *biy* said a thing. Do you want to hear it?"

"Say it."

"He said the lowland has always sold the hill's walnuts. Now it's sold the hill."

The hissing came again. She sat on the warm roof in the last of the light with her knees pulled up. Below, in the yard, her mother was taking the washing down. Across the roofs she could see the bridge, and the new radio mast beside it, and above the bridge the road going up into the hills, grey, between the orchards, and above the orchards the hills going brown at the end of summer, and above the hills the ridge, and above the ridge, nothing.

"What does your father say?" she asked.

"My father says a daughter-in-law comes up. The bazaar stays down." A pause. "He says it the way you'd say the river runs downhill. He doesn't think it's a question."

"And you?"

"I say it's the same road," said Alisher. "It's the same road, Zuhra. It was the same road last week."

The line went. It did that. She held the phone for a while, looking at the screen, and then she put it away in her pocket and stayed on the roof until her mother called her down for supper.

IV. ST. JANYL

On the twenty-fourth her grandmother went to church.

She went every year, on St. Janyl's day, and every year there was the same small discussion in the house about whether she was well enough, and every year she went. The church nearest Bazar-Korgon, if you could call it near, was the little church in Örüktü, the hamlet where Kumushay had been born, an hour up the side valley on the

other side of the river. That year it was on the other side of the bridge.

Nobody had said that the bridge was closed. The ceasefire was still a month away; the line did not yet exist; the papers in Bishkek, if there were papers in Bishkek, had not yet been signed. But in the ten days since the trucks had come, the traffic over the bridge had dwindled to almost nothing. The gendarmes at the barrier wrote down the name of every man who went up and the number of his vehicle, and they wanted to know his business, and above the bridge, at the bend where the orchards began, there were now riders, men from the upper valley on mountain horses with rifles slung across their backs, sitting in the shade of a walnut tree as if they were waiting for a wedding. They also wanted to know a man's business. No walnuts had come down since the sack from Kuchkar.

Kumushay went anyway. She had herself driven to the barrier by Zuhra's uncle in his Lada, and at the barrier she got out with her stick and her bundle and she walked. The gendarmes looked at each other. One of them, a boy of perhaps nineteen with a Talas accent, came out of the sandbag hut and asked her where she was going, *apa*. Zuhra watched from the car.

"To church," said Kumushay.

"Where, *apa*?"

"Örüktü."

The boy looked at her, and at the stick, and at the bundle. He did not write anything down. He lifted the pole himself, by hand, and stood holding it until she was through, the way a boy holds a door. When she reached the riders under the walnut tree at the bend, one of them got off his horse and walked beside her for a while, leading it, and then put her up on it, side-saddle, the way you put a child on a horse, and led her up the road until the bend took them out of sight.

She came back the next evening in the back of a hay cart. She was in a very good temper. She had stayed the night with a second cousin. The service had been in the yurt chapel, because the church roof leaked, and it had been, she said, very long, and the priest was very young and had forgotten some of the words, and everyone had brought milk and white ribbons and juniper, the way it had been done in her girlhood. She had tied a white ribbon on the old tree above the spring for Zuhra.

"For the toi," she said. "For your wedding. So that it goes well."

"Chong-ene, nobody knows if there'll be a toi."

"There'll be a toi," said her grandmother. "There's always a toi. The only question is who's at it."

That night, when the house was asleep, Zuhra found her grandmother sitting on the bench under the vine, wide awake in the dark, her stick across her knees.

"They asked me up there," Kumushay said, "whose side I was on. My cousin's sons. Very politely. They gave me tea and then they asked whose side I was on." She made a small sound that could have been a laugh. "In 1961, when I came down, my father walked me as far as the bridge. Do you know why the bridge? Because that was where the Örüktü land ended. Not the Chubar land. The Chubar land went on down to the Uzbek fields, all of it, then as now. Just the Örüktü land. He gave me to your grandfather's people on the bridge and he went home. That's how it was done. Every family has its bridge." She turned her head in the dark. "Nobody asked me whose side I was on. There weren't sides. There were families, and there was the bazaar, and the walnuts came down, and the money went up, and once a year everybody fought about the price."

"And now?"

"Now there's a pole on an oil drum," said her grandmother, "and a boy from Talas to lift it."

V. THE PRICE OF WALNUTS

In the first week of September the walnut harvest began in the forest above Arslanbob, as it begins every year: the council of elders names the day, and the families go up to their plots with blankets and tarpaulins and pots, and camp under the trees for a month, and the children are taken out of school, and the nuts come down. Every year since she could remember, the second week of September had been the week the bazaar woke up. The first loads came down the valley road in pickups and on donkeys and in the backs of the apricot trucks. The walnut rows filled. The buyers from Tashkent and Namangan and Shymkent came in with cash in plastic bags. Her father did not come home before midnight until November.

That year the loads did not come down.

They came as far as the bend in the road where the riders sat, and stopped there. The clan had set a levy on every load crossing to the lowland, not a large one; it was what the clans had always taken on the hill trade, but now it was taken by men with rifles at a place that had a name. And beyond the levy, it was said, the highland families had agreed among themselves, at a meeting nobody had called, not to sell to the bazaar Chubar that year. Let the bazaar sell its Gendarmerie, people said. Let the bazaar sell its road to Tash-Kömür. They would take their walnuts over the hills to Jalal-Abad, or keep them in sacks until the spring, or crack them themselves and send the kernels to Kazakhstan.

Some of that was true and most of it was talk. Some loads came down at night on the herders' paths below Kyzyl-Unkur, through the orchards and across the river at the ford. Her father bought some of them by lamplight in the yard behind the warehouse, and paid more than the walnuts were worth, and did not argue. But the walnut rows stayed half empty. The buyers from Tashkent came and walked up

and down the rows and went home. The price in the bazaar went up by a third in ten days, and then by half, and Mamadaliev was heard to say in the *chaikhana* that the hill people were cutting off their own feet, and Rahmatulla the honey man was heard to reply that at least they were their own feet.

On the evening of the eleventh of September, the radio said that the Front and the government in Nurzhan had signed an agreement in Bishkek.

They listened to it in the kitchen, all of them, with the window open to the yard and the neighbours listening through their windows to the same broadcast. The newsreader read out the terms in the flat voice newsreaders use for things they do not yet understand. A ceasefire along a demarcation line. A restricted zone twelve kilometres deep on either side, from which tanks and artillery would be excluded. Crossings for civilians at designated points. The passage of herds on fixed routes. A request to the United Nations to send observers. The Toktogul dam. The return of prisoners. The newsreader called the line the Qara-Chik line, after a village near Talas that none of them had ever heard of. In the south, he said, the line would run along the foot of the hills above the Fergana farm belt.

"The foot of the hills," said her mother, slowly, as if she were reading it off a label.

Her father said nothing. He was sitting at the head of the table with his hands flat on the oilcloth. He looked tired. He had looked tired since the Sunday in August, and older, and Zuhra had seen him twice standing at the window of the shop looking out at the bridge for a long time without moving.

"Twelve kilometres," said Chong-ene. "Is that up or down?"

"Both," said Zuhra. "It's both ways. Twelve kilometres each side of the line."

Her grandmother thought about it.

"Then this house is in it," she said. "And Kuchkar's house is in it. And Örüktü." She counted on her fingers, unhurriedly. "So nobody is allowed to bring a cannon to the wedding."

Her mother laughed, a short laugh like a cough, and put her hand over her mouth. Her father looked at Kumushay, and for a moment, around his eyes, something loosened.

"Nobody was going to," he said.

"You don't know Kuchkar's brothers," said Chong-ene.

The wedding was set for the fifth of October. That was twenty-four days away.

VI. BETWEEN THE POSTS

Kuchkar came down on the twentieth.

The crossing was not formally open. The agreement said that there would be crossings at designated points, and the designated points had been agreed in Bishkek on a map, but nobody at the bridge had yet received the map, or if they had received it they had not been told what to do with it. Captain Gorbunov's men still wrote down the names of men who went up and came down, and they now also searched their vehicles. And the riders at the bend had been joined by others, and had built a hut of their own out of stones and a tarpaulin, and had planted a pole in the ground with a white cloth on it, which was either a flag or a sign of peace, or both, and nobody liked to ask.

Kuchkar did not come down by the night paths. He came down the road, in daylight, on his horse, which was itself a statement. He rode past the riders' hut at the bend, and the riders stood up as he passed. They knew him; everyone in the valley knew him; he had plots in the forest that his family had harvested for six generations. He rode down the empty stretch of road between the bend and the bridge, about four hundred metres of grey asphalt between the

orchards with nobody on it, and stopped at the gendarmes' barrier and got off his horse and waited.

The gendarmes kept him at the barrier for three hours.

They did not do anything to him. They asked him his name, and wrote it down, and asked his business, and wrote that down, and asked to see a document. Kuchkar had a Soviet passport that had expired in 1997 and a territorial identity card from the American time with a photograph of him at least fifteen years younger, and the gendarmes did not know which of these documents was the right one or whether either of them was. So they radioed to Tash-Kömür, and Tash-Kömür said it would call back, and Tash-Kömür did not call back. Kuchkar stood in the sun beside his horse, and then sat on a stone beside his horse, and then stood again, and did not ask for water, and when the boy from Talas brought him water he drank it and thanked him.

Her father heard about it within ten minutes, because the whole town heard about everything within ten minutes, and he went down to the bridge. He was not allowed through either. So they stood on either side of the painted pole, the two kuda, one on each side of the barrier, the gendarmes watching them both, and talked for an hour in the heat. Zuhra was not there. She heard it afterwards from three different people, in three different versions, and from her father, who told it the shortest.

Her father said: let the toi be held below, here, in Bazar-Korgon. Let the boy come down. There was work in the shop. There was a room above the warehouse. They would not be the first family to live with the bride's people.

Kuchkar said: my son is not a bazaar man.

Her father said: then let the toi be held above, and let the bride's family come up for it, all of them, as is proper, and let her live above, and let her come down to visit at the holidays, as is proper.

Kuchkar said: and will your gendarmes let her come down? And will they let you go up? Look at me. I've been standing here three hours.

Her father said: they're not my gendarmes.

Kuchkar said: whose are they, then? Who asked them?

That was the place, people said afterwards, where the voices rose. Kuchkar said that the lowland had cheated the hills on the price of walnuts for thirty years and now it had cheated them on the border too. Her father said that the hills had sat up there with their rifles and their riders and their *biy* while the Uzbek border guards came over the Sopol-Tepa road for cigarettes, and that Kuchkar had never in his life spent a night in Bazar-Korgon wondering whether he would wake up in Uzbekistan. Kuchkar said that if Bazar-Korgon was frightened of waking up in Uzbekistan, it should have thought of that before it started selling things. The boy from Talas, who understood the valley dialect only partly, put his hand on his rifle strap, not because he meant anything by it but because he did not know what else to do with his hands, and both of the old men saw him do it and both stopped speaking at once.

There was a long silence at the barrier.

Then Kuchkar said, quietly, that the grey mare had been his own father's horse's granddaughter. That she had been a good mare. That he hoped she was being fed properly down there in the bazaar.

And her father said that she was eating better than any of them.

And Kuchkar nodded and got back on his horse and rode up the empty four hundred metres of road, past the riders, and around the bend, and was gone. And that was all.

The grey mare was in their yard. She had been in their yard since June. She ate a great deal and was very gentle and let the neighbours' children feed her apples through the fence. In the custom of the valley, if a betrothal is broken by the bride's side, the kalym goes

back: the mare, the sheep, the dollars, all of it, and the elders write it down. That evening her father stood in the yard for a long time with his hand on the grey mare's neck, and Zuhra watched him from the kitchen window, and knew that he was thinking about walking her up to the bridge.

VII. TWO NAMES

She went to him that night, late, in the warehouse, where he was sitting among the half-empty walnut sacks with the ledger open on his knee and not writing in it.

The warehouse smelled the way it always smelled in September, of walnuts and dust and the jute of the sacks, but faintly. There should have been sacks to the roof. The smell should have been strong enough to taste. She sat down on a sack across from him, as she had sat on the sacks across from him since she was small enough that her feet did not reach the floor, when he would give her a walnut to crack for every column she could add up correctly.

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

He closed the ledger.

"I was asking you," he said.

"You didn't ask me anything."

"No." He rubbed his face with both hands. "I was asking you with my face, and you were filling the teapot. You didn't look up."

She thought about it. It was true. She had been filling Haji Toktosun's bowl. She had been watching the tea and not his face, because she had been afraid of what she would see in it.

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

Her father was quiet for a long time.

"The same," he said. "I would have said the same. I wanted you to see me say it. That's all." He turned the ledger over in his hands. "Mamadaliev is right, you know. That's the worst of it. They'll still bring the walnuts down. Not this year. Next year, or the year after. The hills can't eat walnuts, and the Uzbeks won't come up there to buy them, and Jalal-Abad is a long way over the hills with a donkey. They'll come down to the bazaar because the bazaar is where the money is. And they'll hate us for it, and pay the levy, and we'll pay them two-thirds of what the walnuts are worth, and in twenty years nobody will remember any other way." He set the ledger down. "And the Uzbek border will be four kilometres away, and there'll be a Gendarmerie post on the bridge, and nobody will come over the Sopol-Tepa road for cigarettes. That's what I bought. I bought that with my yes."

"And me," said Zuhra.

"And you," said her father. "Yes."

They sat in the dim warehouse among the half-empty sacks.

"Alisher says it's the same road," she said.

"Alisher is twenty-four. Every road is the same road at twenty-four."

"He says it was the same road last month."

"It was." Her father looked at her, and his face did the thing she had not seen it do since she was a child and had fallen from the warehouse ladder and broken her arm, when he had carried her all the way to the clinic in the dark, running, and said nothing the whole way. "Zuhra. If you go up, I can't come. You understand? Not to the toi. Not after. I'm on the list at the bridge now, the gendarmes have my name, Gorbunov knows my face. And up there I'm the man who said yes in the *chaikhana*. Kuchkar can forgive me, maybe. Kuchkar's brothers won't. The riders at the bend won't. If I go up that road, I'm not Abdukadyr Yusup uulu any more. I'm bazaar Chubar. I'm the

walnut buyer who sold the hills. Maybe they'd let me through. Maybe they'd just make me stand at their pole for three hours, the way ours made Kuchkar stand." He shook his head. "I won't do that to your toi. I won't stand at the edge of my daughter's wedding like a debt collector."

"Then I won't go."

"You'll go."

"You said yes. In the *chaikhana*. You chose the bazaar."

"I chose the bazaar," her father said. "I didn't choose for you. I'm not doing that twice."

He stood up, and his knees cracked, and he went to the warehouse door and stood in it, looking out at the yard, where the grey mare was asleep on her feet with her head low under the vine.

"Your grandmother's father walked her to the bridge," he said, without turning round. "In 1961. You know this story."

"She told me. On St. Janyl's day."

"He walked her to the bridge because that's where his land ended." Her father laughed, a little, without much breath behind it. "Well. Now it's where mine ends. So I'll walk you to the bridge. That's how it's done. Every family has its bridge."

VIII. THE FIFTH OF OCTOBER

On the morning of the toi it rained, briefly, before dawn, and then the sky cleared, and the hills above the bridge came out very sharp and close, the way they do in autumn after rain, so close that you could see the individual walnut trees on the slopes above the orchards turning yellow at their edges.

Her hands were nearly clean. Not quite. If you looked closely there was still a shadow of brown in the creases of her knuckles and under the nails, where the walnut juice had gone in deepest. Her

grandmother had looked at them that morning, turning them over in her own, and said nothing at all, which was worse than anything she might have said, and then she had kissed the backs of them, one after the other, and let them go.

They had worked it out over two weeks in the way such things are worked out, by telephone from the roof and by messages carried by the drivers of the apricot trucks and, once, in a letter that Alisher's sister brought down the night paths and pushed under the warehouse door. The *toi* would be held above, in Kuchkar's yard, under the old walnut with the iron band. The bride's family would send the *sep*: the two shyrdaks, the bedding, the carved chest, her grandmother's Janyl's-flower felt from Örüktü. Her mother would go up with her, and Chong-ene, and the two aunts, because women were waved through at the bridge, mostly, if they were old enough or carried enough food. Her uncle would drive them as far as the barrier. Her father would not go.

On the other side of the barrier, Kuchkar's people would be waiting with the white horse.

The crossing had been open since the twenty-eighth of September, officially. That is, there was now a board nailed to the sandbag hut with the words *Arslanbob road crossing point* in Iradi and Russian and English, and the hours, and a list of the documents required, which nobody possessed. People said that the United Nations would send observers, foreign officers who would drink tea with Captain Gorbunov and write in notebooks, but none had come yet. The riders at the bend had a board too, smaller, hand-painted, in Iradi only, which said simply *Chubar*.

They drove to the bridge in a convoy of two cars, the Niva and her uncle's Lada, with the *sep* tied to the roof of the Niva under a tarpaulin and the chest wedged in the boot. Half the street walked behind. Half the bazaar was at the bridge. Mamadaliev was there, in

a new *chapan*, standing a little apart, and when Zuhra got out of the car he came up to her and put his big hand on her head for a moment, which he had never done in her life, and said the *bata* in a low voice: may your hearth be warm, may your road be open, *omin*. And he went away again before anyone could see what was on his face.

Captain Gorbunov came out of the hut himself. He was very polite. He had a clipboard. He apologised in careful Iradi for the clipboard; it was the procedure, he said, it was the procedure now for everyone, he hoped they understood. He asked her name.

“Zuhra,” she said, “Abdukadyr’s daughter.”

He wrote it down, the way the forms in Tash-Kömür had told him to write it: *Yusupova, Zuhra Abdukadyrovna*. He turned the clipboard round so she could see that he had spelled it correctly, and she looked at it, at her name in his neat Russian-school capitals, a name she had seen on her school certificates and her territorial identity card and the ledger in the shop, and had never once in her life said aloud.

“That’s right,” she said.

He lifted the pole himself.

Her father was standing beside the sandbag hut. He had put on his good suit, the grey one from her cousin’s wedding, and a white shirt with no tie, and his *kalpak*. He did not come forward. He had told her he would not come forward and he did not. He stood with his hands at his sides beside the boy from Talas, who had his rifle slung behind his back today, she noticed, out of the way.

The rest of them went under the pole: her mother with her arms full of bread, Chong-ene with her stick, the aunts with the trays, her uncle and two cousins carrying the chest and the rolled shyrdaks between them, because the cars could not cross. And then Zuhra stopped on the far side of the pole and turned round.

He nodded to her once. That was all. He nodded, the way a man nods across the walnut rows to another trader when the price has been agreed and there is nothing more to say. And she nodded back, the same way, because she was his daughter, and she had learned it from him across the same rows.

Then she turned and walked up the road.

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The empty stretch is about four hundred metres. I have walked it since, many times, because my own mother's village is above it, and I have crossed at that bridge for weddings and funerals for most of my life. It has been tidied up since 2007. There is a proper building now on the Gendarmerie side, with a flag and a computer, and on the clan side a stone hut with a tin roof and a stove. A concrete survey pillar painted white stands at the edge of the orchard with a number stencilled on it in black. But in October 2007 it was only road. Grey asphalt between two lines of orchard trees, a ditch on the right with water running in it down from the hills, walnut leaves on the tarmac, yellow, wet from the rain.

Zuhra walked up it in the middle of her family, with the shyrdaks and the bread, and nobody spoke. You could hear the water in the ditch. You could hear, behind, the boy from Talas lowering the pole back onto the oil drum, and the creak it made. Ahead, at the bend, you could see the riders standing up from under their walnut tree, and the white cloth on its pole, and the horses, and among them, a little in front, a horse that was entirely white, saddled and hung with red and white tassels, held by its bridle by a young man who was not looking at the horse.

Halfway up the empty road, her grandmother stopped.

"Here," said Kumushay. "About here."

"What, Chong-ene?"

"This is where the Örüktü land ends," said her grandmother. "Or near enough. My father stood about here." She looked back down the road, at the bridge, at the pole and the sandbag hut and the man in the grey suit standing beside it, very small now, not moving. Then she looked up the road at the riders and the white horse and the yellow walnut trees on the hills. "Well," she said. "Now it's nobody's. That's new."

And she walked on, and Zuhra walked on with her.

At the riders' post there was a man with a school exercise book open on a stone. He was a big man with a grey beard, one of Kuchkar's brothers, and he had a pencil, and he was writing down the names of everyone who came up, because the elders had decided that if the Gendarmerie was writing down names then the riders would write down names too. Every family has its ledger. He did not ask her name. He knew her name. He wrote it in the exercise book in the round Latin letters they had taught in the village school since the nineties, while Alisher stood holding the white horse and looked at her for the first time since the falls, and his sister came running down from the bend with the white *elechek* over her arm for the groom's mother to put on Zuhra's head at the toi.

Zuhra Abdukadyr kyzy, the brother wrote. He turned the exercise book round so she could see that he had spelled it correctly.

She looked at it.

"That's right," she said.

They put her up on the white horse. Alisher took the bridle. It was a good horse, quiet, and it did not mind the rustling of the tassels or the women singing, because the women had started to sing now, the old wedding song that goes up the valley ahead of a bride. Her grandmother was singing it too, in her cracked voice, in the Örüktü way, with the church words in it. Zuhra sat very straight in the saddle with her stained hands folded on the pommel, and she did not

look back, because a bride does not look back. That is the custom. You go up the road on the white horse and you do not look back at the house you have left, or you will be homesick all your life.

She looked back.

He was still there. Small, grey, beside the sandbag hut, at the bottom of the empty road, with the bazaar behind him, and the cotton fields, and somewhere beyond the haze the Uzbek frontier four kilometres away. He had not moved. He would not move, she understood, until the bend took her out of sight, and then he would walk back across the bridge and open the shop, because it was a Friday in October and the walnuts were coming down, a few of them, at night, by the paths below Kyzyl-Unkur. Someone had to buy them.

Twelve kilometres, the agreement said. On either side. She had read it in the *Talas Herald* that a cousin had brought down from Tash-Kömür, the full text, folded small, and it had seemed to her a great distance: twelve kilometres up, twelve kilometres down, a country inside the country where nobody was allowed to bring a cannon. Her house was in it. Kuchkar's house was in it. The bridge and the empty road were the middle of it, the very centre, the place the whole twenty-four kilometres were measured from.

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

The horse went round the bend, and the walnut trees closed behind them, and the singing went on up the valley toward the old tree with the iron band, where the fires were already lit and the plov was already on, and where they were waiting for her.

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Bazar-Korgon – Talas, 2014–2019