



Ester

Valery Yuabov

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Yuabov V.

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Advanced stage breast cancer. Ominous and seemingly insurmountable tasks lie ahead. The journey back home and discovery of a natural healer, an herbalist and pulse diagnostician. His impact will break down the mountain, change our views, and enlighten the road ahead. Read on for a glimpse into the journey that brought about intercontinental friendship and healing to countless people. Read on for a story of hope and enlightenment.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the kindest people I have met on my road of life – my mother Ester, my wife Svetlana, Doctor Mukhitdin Umarov, and my friend and mentor Raisa Mirrer.

From the Author

I consider it my duty and pleasant responsibility to express my great gratitude to my friend Raisa Isakovna Mirrer without whose help this book would perhaps not have been written. She not only inspired me to write but also put her soul and enormous experience as a literary editor into our common project.

Chapter 1. The Verdict

In April of 1993, my mama, as always, went to have her annual mammogram, a routine preventive test.

Mama's doctor called a week later.

"Everything is fine," he said reassuringly, "but you'll need a follow-up test at the oncologist's."

She was received by one of the leading oncologists at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, a very well-known New York hospital. Examining her x-ray, he pointed out a large light spot at the base of her left breast.

"We'll need to do a biopsy. I don't think there's any reason to worry. Women your age," he explained to my mother, "often get hard lumps of calcium."

But when he came out of the room where the procedure was being done, the oncologist didn't find it necessary to conceal his apprehension from me.

"It's most likely a cancerous tumor. And it's big – 3 inches in diameter. It'll be clear in a week after I get the results."

A week passed spent in distressed waiting. And there we were back in his office. This time he was also open with Mother.

"Miss Yuabova, you have breast cancer. The tumor is rather large."

Mother sat with her arm up, trying to feel the tumor. The doctor helped her.

"Here it is... It's very deep..."

I still couldn't believe our misfortune.

"How can this be? Two years ago she had a mammogram, and everything was fine. That means that since then..."

"Unfortunately, the tumor has been growing for a long time. It was so deep beneath the surface that the apparatus didn't detect it."

He asked us to sit in the waiting room. I sat down across from Mama, at the window. Outside lay a green valley bathed in sunlight as far as the eye could see, dotted here and there with small houses. Everything was bursting with life, growing, rejoicing, hopeful. But here, in the neatly furnished office, there was no hope. Here, the verdict was pronounced firmly – a long neglected cancer.

It's interesting, I thought, which verdict is it for today? It's not even noon yet. Is it the first or the second? I was afraid to look at Mama. I turned to her only after I heard the sniffing. She was crying, very quietly, as always, without complaining. She was looking down at her handkerchief, running her fingers over it as if seeking an answer to the question – what should be done.

I thought that I knew this woman, so unpretentious, quiet, always concealing her worries and ailments from us. She was patient and sad today when this new ordeal befell her. She must be trying to understand why life, which had never spoiled her, wasn't going to allow her a peaceful restful old age.

"Mama, don't cry," was all I could say, "Don't cry. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid. I'm sorry for all of you," she answered.

And I thought I knew her... My whole life, as far back as I could remember, passed swiftly, haphazardly, in torn fragments before my mind's eye. And she was present in every fragment, our mama, our friend, our defender and support, so fragile yet so steadfast. Even when her life was in danger, she thought about us not herself. I wanted to tell her "Enough, Mama. Let's think about you." But I knew she wouldn't accept it.

I sat there feeling helpless and depressed. I didn't know how to go on living.

The doctor called us in. We listened to his instructions. Mama needed surgery. But first, she had to undergo a course of chemotherapy and radiation to shrink the tumor. All of it was scary. I asked him about the side effects of the chemotherapy. The doctor answered. I asked more questions. The doctor wanted Mother to take part in the conversation and asked me to translate to her in detail

from English. I didn't want to hurt her anymore. I didn't want to tell her that she would soon be losing her hair and that she would feel nauseated. I made up reassuring answers. They'll perform an operation, and everything will be back to normal. The disease will go away.

She sat quietly in the corner, not showing any interest in our conversation. To my explanations she answered, "All right, I see. We'll do what's required." And I continued to ask questions for I was afraid to miss something important, something that could help. But it was becoming clearer and clearer that there was nothing that could help, and that any measures they took would only slow down the disease.

The doctor had kind eyes. I saw and felt that he wanted to help us, but the thing was that he had no means to do it... Medicine itself had no means. In his long practice, Mama was one of hundreds of women who had had that terrible disease. My mama had become a statistic, nothing more. I felt so worthless because I didn't know how to prevent it.

The drive home seemed to last forever. I didn't quite understand how and where I was going. A plane flew over us. My Lord, I thought, we fly higher and higher, drive faster and faster, but in fact – how does that song go? "Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind..."

Chapter 2. Hope

We stopped by Aunt Valya's, simply because we needed to share our grief with someone close to us.

"It's bad," Mama announced. Then she told Aunt Valya what had happened at the doctor's office. She spoke calmly and quietly, as always.

The silence hung in the room. We were sitting on soft comfortable sofas. It seemed that what we were talking about was unnecessary and superficial. I wanted to relax and sit like that till I fell asleep and woke up with a light mind, as if born anew, with nothing terrible hanging over us any longer. But we needed to get up, to go somewhere, do something, make a decision.... But which one? And how?

"Esya, Valera, look here," Valya exclaimed suddenly. "Don't you remember that herbalist from Namangan?"

The herbalist from Namangan... Not that I had forgotten about him, but it was an utterly unbelievable story. Actually, a whole number of unbelievable stories.

It all began with Valya herself. She had asthma for a long time, and none of the treatments helped. The person who helped her was the herbalist from Namangan. He diagnosed her in an amazing way – by taking her pulse. He determined that Valya had a bad liver, and her asthma was simply a consequence of her condition. He treated her with herbs.

Then my cousin Yura became his patient. Around that time, he was a student at Tashkent University, and during a chemical test in the lab he accidentally inhaled poisonous vapors. Yura didn't notice anything, and at first he didn't feel that anything was wrong. After a week he collapsed with an unbearably sharp pain in his stomach. The herbalist diagnosed him in his usual way – by taking his pulse. Then a long treatment with herbs followed. The healer did his job, and Yura recovered.

Another misfortune occurred. That time it was Valya's sister. She had cancer of the lymph nodes, then breast surgery and metastasis, followed by despair and complete hopelessness. Valya rushed to the herbalist from Namangan again. He said that he wouldn't be able to help this time because the disease had been long neglected. Valya begged him, pleaded with him. Then he began doing something incomprehensible. In addition to giving her herbal brews, he told her to apply warm calf manure to the afflicted breast every day, and only calf manure. He said that if she began to recover, pus would accumulate in some spot and then come out of her body. It happened a few months later – pus came out through the sole of her foot.

Those were incredible stories. I had taken them with a grain of salt. That's why I had them in the back of my mind. A bad case of cancer and calf manure! But that woman's life was saved. Doctors confirmed that she no longer had cancer. It had happened. It really had, I thought. And what does modern medicine offer? It offers state-of-the-art equipment, which only helps to diagnose, and often not accurately. It has been established that breast cancer gene carriers need dual screening. That's true, but there's no cure so far. Surgery, radiation, chemotherapy – all that, at best, just stops the process, but it sometimes accelerates it... Cancer is the second most common cause of mortality, surpassed only by cardiovascular disease.

I understood that I would not be able to rid myself of those thoughts, that we would have to decide, to make a choice... But hadn't I done that? Would I be able to give up this hope that had sparkled so suddenly? I was like a drowning man grasping at a straw.

"Why should you go to Namangan?" my accountant Lev asked me upon learning of our misfortune. "Many healers do pulse diagnostics nowadays. There are wonderful herbalist-healers in Chinatown."

It turned out that Lev knew one of those healers. His son had stomach problems. The doctors had failed to help him, but Kenny, a Chinatown healer had. I didn't need much persuading.

The next day, we found ourselves surrounded by a thicket of street ads in the noisy Chinese enclave of enormous New York City. We reached the office of Kenny the healer in a quiet alley. There he had a tai chi school, a karate studio, and his office.

We spent quite a long time in his office. Kenny, a short man of indeterminate age like so many no-longer-young Chinese, behaved just like a regular doctor. He asked my mother what had brought her to his office, where she had pain, what kind of pain, and what conclusions the doctors had already drawn. Then he put Mother's hand on a little pillow and began to feel her pulse near the wrist, just as all general practitioners do when they check the functioning of the heart. He put on a stethoscope and showed my mother into the adjoining examination room. When he came out of the room, he was alone (mother was getting dressed).

He said, "Unfortunately, I won't be able to cure your mother. I'm sorry, but her disease is incurable. I'm really sorry. However, I'll try to make her feel better. I'll give you a combination of roots and herbs. Have her take them." And he left the office.

The same verdict, I thought. Mama will come out of the examination room, and what shall I tell her? What? You'll need to take herbs that won't cure you? There's no cure. Let him take his herbs himself!

We took the herbs anyway. When we brewed them, they smelled terrible. It was a black brew with "fragments from a shipwreck." But what could we do? Mama began to drink that awful concoction, and in a few days she actually felt better. The healer hadn't deceived us. He had done what he could.

But it was absolutely necessary to find the healer from Namangan. He was our last hope.

Chapter 3. 34 out of 36

Telephone communication in Uzbekistan was not the best. I don't remember how many times I tried to reach Namangan without success. I either got a shrill-pitched signal indicating that the line was busy or it disappeared altogether. That was torture, pure torture and my impatience mounted with each passing day.

Yura offered to call his uncle who lived in Tashkent. Uncle Yakov knew the healer. We reached the uncle. He told us that the healer should be at home in Namangan but that he would soon leave for the hajj, which was right around the corner. It turned out that the healer was a pious Muslim and would travel to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage whenever possible.

By this time, my telephone fever had reached its climax. I don't remember what day or time it was when Yura, who was holding the receiver, informed me, "We have a connection."

If I had been holding the receiver, I wouldn't have been able to speak. My whole body felt paralyzed, and there was a lump in my throat. Meanwhile, Yura was already shouting into the receiver, "How do you do. May I speak to Mukhitdin Inamovich? I'm calling from New York, I... Yura Yuabov... Can you hear me?" He stopped to listen and, judging by his tense face, it was clear that the connection was bad. Then he mumbled something and hung up.

"He's away. He's gone to Mecca for the hajj. He'll be back in a month or two."

I fell into a fit of rage. I swore. I kicked the telephone table. I was ready to beat my head against the wall.

"Calm down!" my cousin shouted at me. "Stop acting psychotic!"

"Calm down? Surgery is scheduled for May twenty-first. What shall I do? What? Do I have to make the decision myself?" I shouted in despair.

Yes, it was just three weeks before the surgery, but the main question hadn't been resolved – whether to have the surgery before consulting the healer from Namangan, and then visit him, or to refuse to have the surgery before seeing him and to wait... to wait... to wait for a month or two or three to see him. What could be harder than waiting? And such a scary wait, with the risk of waiting too long.

That's what I had to decide. I was the one who had to decide, because Mama was ready for anything. For the first time in her life, she seemed to have become the child, putting her life in my hands, waiting obediently for my decision, not expressing any opinion of her own.

But I was uncertain.

The oncologist insisted on surgery. "At least let her undergo chemo," he tried to persuade me every time I saw him. "The tumor will shrink, and it will be easier to operate."

"Don't agree," Yura begged me. "Radiation and chemo kill cancerous cells and healthy ones, as well. Then the healer might refuse to treat her."

I hurried back to the oncologist's. I had decided to tell him the whole truth about our hopes, about the strange healer who had calf's manure in his arsenal of treatments. I could see Dr. Pace's embarrassed glance over his eyeglasses.

"I don't know anything about these practices, but I do believe in facts. Where is the proof?"

"The proof? What about saved lives? Isn't that proof?"

Dr. Pace nodded. "You know about the ones who survived. How about those who didn't? How many people didn't?"

I really didn't know. I couldn't argue any longer – with the doctor, with myself, with my pain. "Mama," I said, "you need to have an operation. Then we'll go to visit the herbalist. Do you agree?"

"We'll do whatever you think is necessary," Mama answered quietly.

It was a warm May morning. The hospital reception area, with its semi-circular window the size of the entire wall, was bathed in sunlight. Small sofas and coffee tables were scattered around.

It was quiet and cozy, very cozy. Outside, an equally tranquil panorama spread out before my eyes on that cursed day – green vegetation, cars, people hurrying to the entrance of the hospital... all of them in a hurry, a big hurry. A doctor enters in a sky-blue robe and a nurse in a white one. “They must be in a hurry to cut up someone’s hand,” I thought maliciously. A car arrived. People got out of it. One of them had his hand bandaged. “Here’s their patient.” I wanted to think about anything else, to vent my ill will over my fate on something, to distance myself from my pain and worries. There, in an operating room beyond the closed doors they had been doing something to my mother for three hours now.

Time dragged on unnaturally slowly. It was so quiet in the reception area, so quiet. Almost everyone sat there without moving. Now and then, doctors appeared and sat next to those who were waiting, and they whispered things to each other. I tried to make out what they were talking about. Some of them listened, nodded, and smiled. That meant everything had gone well. One woman leaned against the back of the sofa and covered her face with her hands, crying. Another jumped to her feet, uttered a cry and rushed out. Grief, grief, grief all around...

Then it was my turn. Dr. Pace was approaching me. It seemed to me that he was walking very slowly, as if pondering something, rubbing his wrists. Then he looked at me, and again, it was that kind glance of his that I was now afraid of.

"How did it go?" I don't know whether I actually said it or just moved my lips.

"She was great. She fell asleep right away. I completely removed her breast."

I waited for him to continue. I had to know. Even in my mind I tried to avoid the hated word. He understood. He was a doctor. He had to tell me the whole truth, pure and unvarnished.

"At the base of her breast I removed 36 lymph nodes. Unfortunately, almost all of them were... somewhat hard and paler than usual."

Everything was clear. I would receive the official results after the lab tests, but I had no doubts about the diagnosis of the experienced surgeon.

"Valera," I could feel him tensing up. Poor man, what a difficult profession. "It's up to you to decide about future treatment. Your mother will live another two to three years without chemo. There are three types of breast cancer. The one your mother has is the most aggressive. It's incurable."

Those numbing words pierced my brain. I wanted to hide my heavy head somewhere.

"Sometimes, a bone marrow transplant can be done. But that..." Dr. Pace hesitated and finished with difficulty, "would be like bringing a dead person back to life. It's a very difficult procedure."

The lab results were ready in a week. Thirty-four of the 36 lymph nodes contained cancerous cells. Her cancer had metastasized.

Chapter 4. Uzbekistan – So Far Away and So Close

"You need to walk more, Mama, another lap, there and back."

I was holding her by the arm. She shuffled slowly, with difficulty, followed by her rolling IV-drip. She was so weak, so tired and slowed down by the anesthesia. I tried to talk for both of us.

"The doctor is confident that he had removed everything, down to the roots, Mama. Now it will be all right," I lied, avoiding her eyes. I was constantly afraid that she had already guessed.

"You're by my side, Son," she said leaning on my arm. "That's the most important thing."

Dr. Pace tried to get his patients out of bed on the third day after surgery. "The more you move, the sooner you'll be back to normal," he liked to repeat. I signaled my agreement with him, but I was worn out with pity for her.

We paced slowly up and down the hospital corridor. Mother and son, we were both glad to be together, to have an opportunity, even under such sad circumstances, to be together. Mother was entirely overwhelmed by it. Her son was by her side; he was with her. Everything else was minor. No illness could spoil that for her. My mood was gloomier. I wasn't happy. I wanted to have my mother by my side always. None of us ever parts with this childhood certainty, this youthful feeling that Mama will always be there for us. But now that "always" was not so infinite.

We paced the corridor, mother and son. She smiled. I also smiled and acted reassuring, lying, looking straight ahead, down the emptiness of the corridor. I didn't want to look into the wards.

This was the oncology department. It had many wards, each with three or four beds, and they were almost all occupied. How pale and gray the faces were. The patients lay there, staring indifferently at television sets attached to the ceiling. I had the sensation that they were waiting for something to happen. But what? I didn't know. Or perhaps I could guess.

In those days, I was wrapped in darkness. We had lost many of our close friends in the last few years – young and old, healthy and sick. Death was merciless. With each loss, I felt our circle of friends becoming smaller, continuously shrinking. The loss was also coming closer to our family. Now it was very close. Had our turn arrived?

I tried to drive such thoughts away, to rid my mind of them. But they didn't obey me. Strange sensations accompanied them. Blurry white shapes began to appear at the end of the corridor, mysterious apparitions. They were doing something. They were stirring. I found myself trying to get a better look at them – perhaps they wanted to explain something to me? But then I would shake my head and turn away. What lunacy this was! I was simply exhausted.

Mama was back home on the fifth day after the operation. Those were the American hospital regulations. However, it was better, calmer at home, without all those horrible things that go on at a hospital. Besides, the decision had been made. We were not going to wait here, on the other side of the world, for the healer's return from the hajj. We would go to Uzbekistan and wait for him there. I informed Mama on our first evening at home.

"We'll make the reservations and leave in a couple of weeks."

She responded calmly, as always, "Whatever you like... Is the healer back?"

"Not yet. He'll return eventually. We'll wait for him in Tashkent. It's easier to get to Namangan from there."

Though "to get there" from America, wasn't that simple. We needed Uzbek entrance visas. No one knew where to get them. Telephone calls to the Uzbek Consulate General in New York went unanswered. That was a mysterious institution. Perhaps it didn't actually exist. But since our itinerary was via Moscow, we decided that we would get our visas there.

We made preparations for the trip with a strange uneasy feeling. The homeland had remained the homeland. The memory of it, the longing, had a life of its own that wasn't always on my mind or perceptible in my soul. It was as if it always existed in the background, usually subdued, but now and

then it revealed itself in painful and acute spurts. Now it felt as if it had left its underground hiding place and burst out into the open. But it also meant real reservations and worries. My ill mother and I were going to our homeland. We hadn't been there for 15 years, and the impact of immigrating was still as intense as ever. Here in New York, whenever we visited friends or met someone on the street, or talked to someone on the phone, we received information that I couldn't call pleasant or reassuring.

"Did you know the Niyazovs? A day before their departure, men in masks entered their house, robbed them and beat them up."

"Have you heard about the Yusupovs? He went there to sell cars. He was shot... his poor mother... poor kids."

My mother had also heard such news. She was going there filled with fear, but not for herself, of course.

It was a gloomy day. Moscow. The Sheremetyevo Airport. A big crowd welcoming those who had just arrived, people hurrying somewhere – the usual airport bustle. I tried to concentrate on looking for a person I didn't know who was supposed to be holding up a piece of paper with my name on it. Or perhaps that paper would be attached to his coat? Oh, maybe he had forgotten to bring it along? What's the name of the person who was asked to meet us? Anatoly Kolesov. Where was he? What if he had fallen ill?... or... Calm down and look around one more time.

At that moment I heard, "Are you Valera? Yes? Welcome."

"I'll be damned," I said to myself. "He figured out who I was on his own."

Anatoly turned out to be friendly and nice – a tall, light-haired fellow with a pleasant face. It immediately took a load off my soul.

First, we went to the Consulate General of Uzbekistan. On the surface it was a very imposing consulate – a wonderful building with granite steps, shiny floors, many red rugs... and empty corridors. But at last someone opened the door, perused our American passports and asked us to wait. We spent over an hour in the cool empty corridor surrounded by silence and crimson rugs.

Finally, we were invited into an office where a representative of the Uzbek state, a tall gloomy man, told us strictly, "In order to enter Uzbekistan, you need visas. There are no visas in your passports. Why? Where are they?"

I explained, "Your Consulate General in America doesn't work. No one answers telephone calls."

"That can't be true," the official answered gruffly in a measured tone.

I repeated that my experience had been exactly as I told him.

He continued his interrogation, "Why do you want to visit our country? For medical treatment? What? Are there no doctors in America?"

"We have tried them there. Now we would like to try someone... in your country." I pronounced "in your country" with difficulty. It sounded somewhat ridiculous. In fact, I was going to the place where I had been born. What an idiotic thing borders were, after all.

"What's the name of the doctor?" he asked for no reason. I answered. "I haven't heard of him. I don't know him," he said.

Oh, my Lord, will this be a reason not to grant us visas? What terrible red tape. I was no longer accustomed to it. I grew nervous. I wanted to answer him defiantly, but I had to exercise patience.

Then, suddenly he said, "You will have to see the Consul and explain to him what you have just explained to me, but he won't believe you and won't approve your visas."

I almost choked on my words: "It can't be true..."

But he stopped me with a gesture. "Look here. You were born and grew up in Uzbekistan?" He was looking at my mother. Mother nodded. "And your parents are buried there?" Mother answered, "In Samarkand."

"Aha," I thought, the conversation is shifting to a different plain, a more comprehensible one. They want money... But how can I offer them a bribe? A typist was rattling away on her typewriter nearby. Another staff member was concentrating on reading some papers.

"All right," he announced loudly and almost solemnly. "Your parents are buried in Samarkand. You left your hometown a long time ago and now you wish to visit their graves. That's good," he turned toward his staff members as if inviting them to approve our intention. "That's very good. You are really the loving daughter and grandson," he concluded enthusiastically and picked up the receiver. "Aziz Sharipovich? I have a family from America here... Yes, formerly from Samarkand, our people... The reason? It's a very noble one – to visit their parents' graves. Shall I send them to your office?"

The next office was even grander than the first one. It was large, with a high ceiling and windows and a huge flag of the republic on the wall. The green flag nicely complemented the somewhat colorless interior of the room. The Consul, an elderly man whose name, Aziz Sharipovich, we already knew, was installed imposingly behind a small desk and was sending inquisitive glances in our direction. I had been wrong to assume that it would be a businesslike part of our meeting. He began his interrogation.

"So! You left long ago. How is it there?"

"A bit difficult," I began, but Aziz Sharipovich wasn't interested in my answer. He had his own agenda.

"I've never understood people who gave up everything and left. I can't understand that. Why? Was our life so bad?"

I didn't want to answer. Why would I? Didn't he know that he was lying? Does he really believe that there was no oppression, no discrimination? Did he really think that people had just abandoned the homes where they had lived for such a long time, giving up everything and leaving? And if he really was so blind, it was hardly possible that I could open this bureaucrat's eyes and he would become intelligent, kind and sympathetic. Aziz Sharipovich continued his didactic monologue.

"In my position, I have seen many of those who left Uzbekistan, the ones like you. Many of them were sorry they had done it. Some of them returned... with my help. What about you?"

I didn't want to answer and, shrugging my shoulders, I mumbled something incomprehensible.

Then suddenly I heard my mother's voice. My silent mother began to talk, and not just talk, but talk in Uzbek. Her voice sounded melodious and beautiful, almost tender. The Consul raised his eyebrows. The Consul smiled. The Consul joined in. He pulled the teapot toward him and poured a fragrant stream into some tea bowls. Then smiling, almost cordial, the Consul offered mother a bowl of tea.

"You're a real trooper," he exclaimed after talking to mother for a few minutes. "So many years have passed, but you still remember everything, and the language, and..."

A pause followed. Aziz Sharipovich finished his tea, put the tea bowl down and summed up the conversation decisively, "All right, three weeks – Tashkent, Samarkand and Namangan. Naturally, you know that it's necessary to pay for visas. How much? Mmm... 800 dollars."

I'd already realized that this was a show in two acts performed solely for the sake of money, in which the lines changed slightly depending on the audience who were also involuntary participants. The closing line "It's necessary to pay for visas" never changed. At any rate, payment for visas was a legitimate procedure. But that amount, that additional payment for the diligently performed show, was highway robbery by an official entity...

"Pardon me, Aziz Sharipovich, we are from America, but even there 800 is quite a large sum."

We bargained until we finally got it down to 350. We left for Tashkent that same night.

Chapter 5. The Smoke of Homeland

"You'll have to wait," the white-haired soldier in the booth said.

We had landed in Tashkent an hour before. It was about 5:00 a.m. We could see through the terminal windows that it had just begun to get light. We were taken down the long corridor along with other arriving passengers, our footsteps resounding on the granite floor. And now all the passengers, suffering from exhaustion and uncertainty, were crowded into the passport control area.

"Your business visa was issued incorrectly," one of them was told.

"You don't have a stamp. Pay for a visa at that window," another one was informed.

A long line had formed at "that window," but no one was there to staff it. People in the line quietly expressed their indignation. You don't find such disorder in document checking and processing in other airports around the world.

"What will he find wrong with our visas?" I thought in dismay. "They seem to be fine." But the soldier continued his examination, illuminating Mama's picture with a blue light and glancing indifferently from her picture to her face and back.

"Is something wrong?" I had lost my nerve.

A long pause followed. "There are many fake American passports. As I told you, you'll have to wait for my superior."

"White-haired goat!" I cursed, in my mind of course.

His superior showed up after forty minutes. He briefly perused our documents and nodded. "They're perfectly fine." But that was not the end, far from the end. "Go there." "Pay over there." "Your baggage hasn't been delivered yet."

Mama, totally exhausted, sat down on the only chair in sight, and even it was backless. "You'll never drag me here again."

"Yes," I thought, "Over these 15 years we've become quite unused to so many things." And there, outside, those who were meeting the arriving passengers had been waiting patiently all that time. Our Yakov, in leather jacket and eyeglasses, was among them. He waved his hand and smiled reassuringly from time to time.

The conveyer belt began to hum and suitcases and various bags began arriving from the far corner of the baggage claim area. Finally, our luggage arrived. The last ordeal – a search – and we were free.

A not-too-tall, well-built Yakov Gavrilovich, with his good-natured smile, hugged Mama and me. "How are you? How was your flight? Is everything all right?"

We climbed into his Zhiguli, and the wheels began to rumble along the asphalt. Mama and Yakov were talking animatedly, as I greedily inhaled the air that burst into the car. It was warm Asian air whose waves enveloped me in reminiscences. Korotky Lane... our courtyard... the apricot tree... the old town... my Teachers Training Institute... They were all here, within reach. Wide streets, *ariks* (small canals lining the streets), trees... They were all dormant in my memory, hiding there, biding their time, their moment to come back to life.

Turn after turn, street after street, square after square, Tashkent opened up before us. Yes, it was just the same as before. Most of the houses were made of concrete, some of brick. They were low and gray, though so beautiful in my imagination. The wide streets were lined with shade trees, and *ariks* ran along the sides. Both small and large parks were so clean and well kept. The city was distinguished by its cleanliness. It seemed that janitors, old women in kerchiefs were swishing their twig brooms day and night. A streetcar passed, sending up a shower of sparks. How familiar the squeaky sound of its wheels! We stopped at a light. Electric wires up in front of us began to move and as if before a long-awaited encounter, I became agitated, thinking, "Here it comes." And here it was – a clunky streetcar immediately rounded the corner... "Puff, puff." Sparks flew from the

spot where the wires crossed. As we were waiting for the light to change, many cars arrived at the intersection. White gas fumes burst from exhaust pipes.

"They're as stinky as before," Mama sighed.

"It's the gas we use," Yakov responded apologetically. "76."

"It doesn't stink at all," I thought. "Just smells a little. It's even pleasant."

They'd been waiting for us at Yakov's place. His wife Tatyana and daughter Olga welcomed us from the doorway, and as soon as we saw them, we felt at home.

If you mixed together everything good, all the kindness and sensitivity a human being could have, then most likely people like Yakov and his wife would be the result. It was clear from the very first moment of our encounter that they were such people, without any duplicity and pretension.

Neither I nor Mama knew them very well. And when we had been getting ready for our trip, we had felt somewhat uncomfortable. Who were we to burden them with our grief and the severity of our situation? To take up their time, to crowd them, particularly in a country where every day living was a challenge? But they were the kind of people for whom helping others came as naturally as living and breathing. Perhaps, for them it happened all by itself, without any special decisions or careful consideration. That's just the way the Ilyayev family was.

Tatyana, a woman of medium height with short hair, walked around quickly giving instructions.

"Valera, make yourself comfortable in the living room, and you, Esya, will have a rest on the veranda. It's cozy... We'll talk about everything later... You must be tired after your journey... Olya, is the bed ready?"

It was the middle of the day. Children's ringing voices could be heard from outside. I didn't want to waste time taking a nap, but we were obviously exhausted after a two-day journey that hadn't yet come to an end. Besides, it was a different time zone... I couldn't argue with our hostess.

"Yura should be calling soon to find out how our trip went," I told her. And with that, I was dead to the world.

Chapter 6. The Unfamiliar Lane

"Valera? Is that you?" Valentina Pavlovna asked with astonishment. Her voice on the phone sounded exactly as it had when she used to stand at the blackboard writing yet another rule of Russian grammar or sat at her desk reading from a book many years before. It was the same clear, precise, unhurried voice, and still a very dear one. "In Tashkent? With Mama?" she echoed. "Look, that's wonderful!"

I don't know if she remembered what I looked like, but I remembered her as if she were standing in front of me – her Slavic face with its gentle features, eyeglasses, short hair, her kind but piercing gaze. "Well, Yuabov? Show us what you know." I generally enjoyed reading so I seldom blushed under that gaze of hers.

I remembered how during summer vacation I would come to her place to pick up another one of the books we were required to read during the summer (of course, there were many other books on her book shelves), and Valentina Pavlovna would tell her children, Kolya and Sasha, reproachfully, "Shame on you. Valera has already read all the required books. And you? What loafers you are!"

I would hesitate, blush and curse myself for not having come secretly at a time when they weren't at home. Now I would inevitably hear from them, "It's your fault we're always in trouble."

Valentina Pavlovna shouted "Ah!" when she learned that we would be in Tashkent for just three weeks. "Of course, we'll get together. Will you visit me?"

"By all means."

We immediately decided when we would meet. I had to plan our time precisely. We wanted to see our friends and relatives, to visit the corners of Tashkent that I remembered with a heavy heart, and to go to Samarkand with Mama to visit her parents' graves. So, the three weeks would be packed with activity.

It was Sunday. Yakov Gavrilovich and I were riding across Tashkent. Our destination was Korotky Lane, my childhood street, the house where I was born, the courtyard where I grew up, where my apricot tree stretched its branches toward the sky.

The Ilyayevs lived downtown. It was only a ten-minute ride there, but with every passing moment I felt more and more worried and tense, and there was something else I couldn't put my finger on. Most likely this was all what one would call agitation.

A small park flashed by. There was something that surprised me about it; things around it were both familiar and strange...

"Yakov Gavrilovich, so where's the Turkmensky market?" I exclaimed after I realized what was missing. "Where's the market? I remember clearly that it was here."

"Yes, it was, but it's not here any longer," Yakov sighed. "They renovated and reopened it, and then they had to close it. Prices went up after the renovation, and people stopped going there. It's not accidental that they say it's not a good idea to renovate markets."

We had left the small park far behind, but I was still sighing and shaking my head to drive away the memories that were clearly visible, like hallucinations – cool tents with stalls, bright heaps of vegetables and fruits, the merry hum of the crowd, ringing shouts of sellers hawking their goods – it was a strange, sad feeling, like losing a friend.

Meanwhile, we had almost arrived. Here was Herman Lopatin Street, still wide and quiet, with the same shop on the corner. We turned left, and there was Korotky Lane. It hadn't changed either, thank God. But no, it wasn't quite the same. Here on the corner there used to be garbage bins with black buzzing flies circling above them. I could hear them buzzing. Could I, or did it only seem so to me? Yes, it just seemed so. There were neither bins nor flies there. All right, it was probably for the better. And now our alley was paved in asphalt. It was a pity that there was no more green grass pushing its way up near the walls, and no dandelions – first yellow, then fluffy and grayish. Various

bugs used to scurry back and forth here. They weren't there any longer. Even the walls that formed our alley had changed. In the past they were made of clay with bits of straw sticking out of them. Now they were smooth and polished. What a pity. It would have been nice to pull at the straw.

Only one person could have carried out all those innovations – the new owner of our house, because the only gate in the alley was ours or, to be precise, his. I just couldn't get used to that.

The gate wasn't the same. Ours had been made of dark-red wood, with the number "6" in white chalk on it. Instead, I saw something bulky, made of metal in an indistinguishable color. The light bulb on the thin rod wasn't there either. Even though it had been dim, it had been like a beacon for all of us coming home when it was dark. Now there were living quarters above the gate.

"What the heck is this?" I thought angrily. "What have they done here?" I couldn't quite accept the idea that the courtyard didn't belong to me any longer. I couldn't reconcile my memory with the reality, and I continued to look for something sweet and dear to my heart. I heard hens clucking behind the gate, and I was ridiculously happy because they were clucking just as they had in the old days.

I was a little afraid. What if he wouldn't let us in, this new owner? I didn't know him at all. I'd never seen him, but I already didn't like him. As Yakov Gavrilovich was ringing the bell – Another innovation! Why would one need a bell if there was a gate to knock at? – I tried to catch a familiar sound from behind the wall on the right. There had been a time when the neighbor's cow would press against the wall, chewing her hay with noisy enthusiasm. I used to call her and she knew my voice, so she would moo in answer. But now the wall was silent.

The door in the gate opened slightly. We could see a short middle-aged man with a face as inexpressive and colorless as the metal gate. He listened to us with an expression of perplexity and hostility on his face. He couldn't understand what had brought us there. I had grown up here? So what? There was nothing for me to look at. Nothing old is left here, nothing. He had replaced everything. Everything here was new. It was his. There was nothing for me to do here. And then, the expression that appeared on his face reminded me of the huge iron padlock hanging from the gate. I understood that we would not be allowed to enter.

As Yakov continued negotiating, now trying to ingratiate himself, now becoming excited, with this disgusting character, I tried to look into the courtyard. But the new owner placed himself in the half-open door like a solid rock. The space was blocked by his shoulders, his belly sticking out from under his T-shirt, and his unshaven mug. I spun like a top and stretched my neck, but all my eyes could glimpse was cement, gray and bleak.

"My apricot tree. Where's my apricot tree? You unshaven ogre, what have you done to it?" No, I couldn't see my apricot tree through that human blockade.

A frightening silence hung in the air of the courtyard. The hens were silent. I didn't hear a single bark or the clanking of a dog chain. Jack couldn't possibly be there, but it would be good to hear the presence of any dog. A Tashkent courtyard without a dog is nothing. But there was nothing alive in this courtyard after all, for this soulless indifferent guardian of someone else's place, which had been stripped of its soul, didn't quite seem alive.

For a few days I was overwhelmed with anger and longing. Then I couldn't wait any longer and went to Korotky Lane without saying a word to anyone. I will give in, I thought. I will be polite and charming. I will explain that I have come from far away. I will tell him that I have dreamed of seeing the courtyard of my childhood. And maybe I'll be lucky, and that character won't be at home? Today's a working day... and women... they are definitely gentler.

This time I didn't ring the bell. I pleased myself by knocking hard on the gate. The rattling sound echoed between the walls.

I was out of luck again. The owner was at home. He opened the door. This time he wasn't wearing that shabby undershirt. He was wearing a suit and tie, but he refused to change the expression on his face. Well, he probably couldn't, even if he wished to.

He interrupted my eloquent explanation decisively and quickly. "So, what is it? You're from America? I asked you not to come here again."

And the door in the gate was slammed in my face, obviously for good.

Chapter 7. “(I am back in my) hometown, so familiar I want to cry...”

(Osip Mandelshtam)

“Welcome to Chirchik.” The stone plaque with the graying inscription stood on the hillock near the small bridge just as before. The Troitsky borough, the first one at the edge of town seemed different. Once it was bustling with life, with people dashing back and forth in every direction. Now it was somewhat quiet and deserted, as if frozen in anticipation of the arrival of a long night. We overtook a bus. It was shabby, dusty, lop-sided as if it was about to fall over. No wonder. People were packed into it like sardines in a can. The bus crawled along slowly like a caterpillar that had had too much to eat. I had enough time to hear it groaning. “Poof-poof,” it went, as if trying to say, “I’m doing my best, I’m working, it’s just that I’m too old.”

The tall chimney of the chemical factory could be seen in the distance. It looked the same as before, but no, something was different. Excuse me! Where’s the smoke, the thick yellow poisonous column of smoke that used to shoot up into the sky? It wasn’t there. It meant that the immortal sleepless factory had collapsed, and there, behind the long fence still topped with barbed wire, everything was dead. To tell you the truth, I was not in the least sorry about the demise of the factory.

Streets flashed by. They were familiar, but somewhat alien at the same time – Theatre Street, Pushkin, Lenin... And there he was himself on the pedestal. The same overly concerned gaze directed somewhere above the trees. His body was bent forward, and he was pointing at the horizon with his hand, calling upon his confederates to march toward the bright future... Had I really lived here? Yes, I certainly had, for I knew everything, down to the smallest details, every nook and cranny. Why did it feel like I had only been here as a tourist?

The engine of our car was laboring intensely, roaring as we drove uphill, to the spot where the Chirchik River flowed under the bridge. It sparkled so brightly under the sun at its zenith that pain flashed through my eyes and I had squint. Then something very pleasant appeared in the semidarkness as seen through my slightly open lids. I even heard the familiar voices...

“Don’t be afraid! Jump!” the kids yelled, trying to be heard over the noise of the rushing water. I was standing close to the bank up to my waist in water and didn’t dare jump. From the beginning of the bridge I had to swim to its middle support; that was the swimming rule. The icy mountain water was burning my skin. I swayed under the pressure, which was so powerful that I would have to swim back almost against the current. Otherwise, I would be carried away below the bridge. I jumped... And I didn’t remember anything else. I must have swum desperately, resisting the mighty and indifferent force of the water. It was possible that one of the kids picked me out of the water as I tried to swim by... I just remember that I was awfully frightened. At last I understood why people were not allowed to swim there. Quite a few daredevils like me and my friends had drowned there. But my fear was receding, it was letting me go, and my joy was becoming stronger. “I wasn’t a chicken. I swam, I’m still one of the gang.”

Finally, we approached the settlement of Yubileyny (Jubilee). It was still very spacious, with even more greenery than before – there were more trees. But what had happened to the “Oktyabr” (October) movie theater? Why were the theater windows covered up? And the glass on the entrance door was cracked. And the poster boards were empty. They must have closed the theater... How sad.

And at last... there was our building, number 15. After getting out of the car, I first looked at the third panel from the ground on our building. No, I didn’t imagine it. There were distinct marks – round marks of clay exactly at the spots at which we, the guys, had been throwing balls of clay the last time.

It was quiet all around. I was listening very closely. Something was missing, some habitual sounds... Ah, I knew – I didn't hear the babbling of water, that quiet tune that had sounded from spring to autumn, day in and day out. But the *ariks* were silent on that summer day.

The soccer field... its net was gone, the pavilion was lopsided, and its roof full of holes. Steam heating pipes hung at a height of three yards along the entire length of the street. They looked horrible, with their decayed casings hanging from them. And the kitchen garden! It had been abandoned and overgrown by weeds. The natural green fence expanded, the shrubs' branches sticking out in all directions. The poor old tree stood forlornly, its branches broken, dents like wounds along its trunk. Even the bench near the entrance had become an invalid – its back was missing.

"Valera, is that you? You've made it here at last!"

I raised my eyes. A gray-haired bent-over woman in glasses was looking out at me from the second-floor balcony. She was laughing. She was glad to see me. And I—I froze and my jaw dropped. I recognized that voice, and there was something familiar about her, but only something... Oh my, I hadn't expected to see how much time had changed her, my teacher Valentina Pavlovna. Teachers don't grow old in their students' memory.

I shouted something cheerful, waved my hand, and we entered the building. Each step of the staircase was a page from the book of memory, and, instead of the sounds of our steps, I heard children's voices, the clinking of broken glass, the humming of Dora's coffee mill and her incessant blabbering.

A whole bunch of relatives and friends got together at the apartment of Edem, my old friend – his parents Emma and Rifat, his brother Rustem, their wives and children. All were excited, animated, toasts were given. Everyone drank to us, to our meeting again. In other words, everything went according to the accepted ritual. And still I experienced a strange feeling, and it grew with every passing moment. Something was missing in our get-together. Something had changed, but what?

"Here, Esya, we have no future," Edem's mother Emma explained to my mother. "We're just living out our lives. That's it. Life has become quite dreadful."

She was sitting with her arms crossed over her chest. Her once jet-black hair had become gray, and neither cream nor powder could freshen her face. Emma was an energetic woman. Once she had the *belyash* shop (large meat dumplings) in the market place. She did very well. Her *belyashes* were great – fat and juicy. When Mama reminisced about it, Emma just waved her hand.

"Oh, Esya, no more *bellyaches*. We've been driven away from the market."

"Why?" I wondered to myself. "Who could be bothered by juicy *belyashes*? Was that what they called *perestroika*?"

Edem also complained. He worked at the construction company, just as his father before him. After he had finished a big job, he wouldn't get paid.

"That's the common practice today," he explained to me. "Now, everything's on credit. We have to wait."

None of them had good news. Plans for the future were very indefinite. Some of them dreamed about going back to their homeland, to the Crimea. Others wanted to move closer to their children, to Russia. And they all unanimously brushed away our questions – there's nothing good to tell you about, we're just living out our lives – and were eager to learn about our life in America. They were surprised by the most common things that we took for granted. And none of them, not a single person could understand why we had dragged ourselves to the edge of the earth to visit a local healer. America must have everything imaginable.

I was sad. I was ashamed, as if it were me and not the local government that were responsible for my friends' awful life and lack of hope of improvement. Besides, I understood that that was not all that had changed.

Many years ago, I was the son of a simple seamstress and a teacher. We were poor. I often envied other boys who could afford much more than I – a book subscription, a bicycle or a hockey

stick. I envied them and I dreamed. Now we had traded roles. But the gap between dreams and reality had become immeasurable.

I approached the window of the veranda. From there, from the third floor, a whole panorama opened up, the whole area where I had walked time and again in my childhood. The vegetable garden... The *arık* where we formed our balls of clay... The corner of the building with its garbage bins... I peered and peered into that space, trying to picture everyone I knew in the past in those places. I tried to envision the boys kicking a soccer ball here, the adults on the bench near the entrance discussing the day's events, the noisy construction next door... but in vain. The colors had faded, familiar faces were not coming back, their voices couldn't be heard... Perhaps all that did not surface in my imagination because everyone and everything had changed in this reality that had become different, faded. I experienced a very strange feeling as I was standing at the veranda window. Something was gone for good, had disappeared, had stopped beckoning to me.

At the time, I didn't yet understand that my nostalgia, my yearning for childhood, for the settlement of Yubileyny were disappearing for good along with that strange feeling.

Chapter 8. “And here there used to live...”

Time flew by. We had been in Tashkent for almost two weeks, but the healer still hadn't appeared in Namangan. And no one knew when he would be back. Tension was mounting; a sense of alarm was growing. Sometimes I panicked –what if we never got to see him? Our friends did everything possible to make our agonizing wait easier. They invited guests to entertain us; they took us out.

One day we visited Yakov's countryside cottage. I climbed out of the car and gasped, “Oh, my God, how long I've been dreaming about this! Right by the gate there were two sour cherry trees. They were short, young, and dotted with dark-red, shiny cherries. They were not just shiny, but they sparkled with reflections of light like little stars in the night sky. They stuck out on all sides of the branches on their strong little green stems as if on the needles of a hedgehog. I rushed over to those beauties and, like a little boy, stuffed my mouth with juicy fragrant cherries.

“Just imagine... there are no such cherries in America! No, cherries there are absolutely tasteless,” I explained to the laughing Yakov.

I also remember another trip. Yakov Gavrilovich decided to show me the factory where he worked. It manufactured reinforced concrete plates for construction of residential buildings. We wandered through half-empty workshops where big machines, forklifts and elevators could be seen. Most of them were not working. The workshops' capacity was only partially used. When I asked why, Yakov answered, “You see, we used to be a link in the chain. We received raw materials, made plates and delivered them to construction companies. Now, the chain has fallen apart, as the country has fallen apart. That's why we don't work to full capacity.”

Obviously, these sad circumstances hadn't affected the life of the local bosses. We arrived at the factory on Friday, and Friday was the so-called “let's detox” day for local bosses. For that purpose, the management of the factory had had a special complex built – a sauna with a steam room and swimming pool, a gym, a billiard room, and many other things just as pleasing. But, naturally, the most important part of “detox” was “a feast.” About 30 people could fit around the table in the dining room. After taking a sauna and swim, they usually had their feast.

And that's what happened that day. We were among the invited guests. I was “served” as an American guest, an exotic fruit from overseas, so to speak. My head was spinning from the noise, laughter, guitar strumming, endless toasts, and thick cigarette smoke.

“Well, will you come back? Will you?” one of the bosses asked from the other end of the table. The noise died away. Everyone waited for my answer.

“I'll come for a visit,” I answered somewhat hesitantly. The whole table burst into thunderous laughter.

“That's my man! To our guest!” the boss toasted and emptied his small glass in one gulp. It must have been his tenth drink.

I wandered around the city alone in the mornings visiting street markets and once-familiar streets. I stopped at my dear Teachers Training Institute. It looked horrible. Two fires had ravaged it since I left. The second one was particularly devastating. The institute was disfigured and half-destroyed. I couldn't look at the charred columns of the main entrance without pain. Though the building was under renovation, classes were being held in the adjoining annexes. Entrance exams were underway in the music department. Students scurried back and forth talking... I tried to get a closer look at them as if expecting to see familiar faces. I listened to their voices when I caught Russian spoken. No, even though everything was familiar, I didn't know anyone there. And the Russian language was not considered official any longer. The inscriptions on all the plaques on the doors of the dean's office and various divisions, shiny and black, the same as in my time, were now in Uzbek. They didn't want anything Russian there.

Once, returning home after a walk, I decided not to wait for a bus and instead flagged down a private Moskvich car. The driver was an elderly man with thick graying hair and strong hands who held the wheel firmly. He kept his car very clean. In short, the man – his name was Volodya – was nice and of few words. He drove me, taking short cuts through narrow alleys with old one-story houses made of clay and brick. I had surely been there before but recognized nothing.

After we had entered those dense quarters, Volodya grew sad and even began to sigh. I didn't feel comfortable asking him what was wrong. I didn't want to. I didn't dare. But suddenly he said, without looking at me, "Can you see those houses? The Germans used to live there, many Germans."

I was silent. I wasn't yet sure why he was telling me about it. We rounded a corner. Volodya sighed once again and slowed down. "And the Tatars lived here... remember?"

I kept silent. Is it his business whether I remember or not? I didn't want to tell him where I was visiting from.

"And here..." We were driving very slowly. Volodya was viewing the alley with mournful attention, as if he had come here for the purpose of paying tribute to the abodes of deceased relatives. "This was a Jewish alley... here, here and there... The Jews still lived here not so long ago, just ten years ago."

He wasn't looking at me, and it appeared that he was talking to himself. At that point I couldn't keep silent any longer. "So, was it good or bad?"

Volodya turned his head and looked at me with disdainful amazement. "What do you mean, good or bad? What can be good about it? All the teachers, engineers left... shoemakers, tailors, butchers... all of them real masters of their trades... Such great people were forced to leave!"

And then he began to tell me about himself, and I learned that Volodya was an engineer and that many of his friends who used to work with him at the same factory had left Uzbekistan. "And today in the republic..." He grunted again and grew silent.

Then we were both thinking about the past, about the things that had been lost for good. But perhaps for me who had left 15 years before it was not as painful as for Volodya. I had acquired something to replace it. But he... he continued to lose. He had been losing something all those years. And now it seemed he had lost hope.

Chapter 9. The Healer from Namangan

The day was breaking. Our Zhiguli rattled down a concrete road. The healer had come back at last. Yakov had arranged our visit, and we set out for Namangan immediately. I mean, we rushed there... we were flying along as if we had wings. But that would be an exaggeration since we had been driving for over an hour and were still within the city limits. The suburbs had flashed by. Now there were fields, mostly cotton fields on both sides of the highway, or meadows with cows grazing here and there. There were also gardens and orchards. Even though the soil here was clay, it was, as they said, rich, very fertile. The republic was famous for that. Out of all the people who had settled on this land, only the Uzbeks, a very industrious people, truly enjoyed its fertility. Love for the land was fostered from generation to generation. Everyone, from children to adults, worked on the land from sunrise to sunset. Bent over with hoes or shovels, old and young worked in the fields or in their gardens, digging up the beds, turning up soil, sowing, planting seedlings... I saw them toiling, those hard-working people, many times as a child. It seemed that they didn't get tired. Being able to grow things was the main joy of their lives.

The road climbed, and we were in the mountains. We were driving directly to Namangan – via Angren and then over the Kamchik and Pungam Mountain passes in the spurs of the Tian Shan, then down into the Fergana Valley. It was an almost five-hour drive, longer if anything happened. The road over the mountain pass had never been easy, and now, in this time of troubles, this era of collapse, general mistrust, feuds among the republics and growing terrorism, it was even more difficult. Who knew what might be in store for us there? Explaining why we were going there to border guards and passport controls would be all right. But what if we bumped into bandits? People said that extortion of gas had become a normal practice. We had prepared as well as possible for such unexpected encounters. The second car followed us. We preferred to travel as a group. Yakov, our patron, sat next to the driver and supervised the itinerary. So far, everything had gone fine. Even the road, contrary to my expectations, was in good shape – not too many holes and bumps.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the window. For me, a city boy who had grown up in Tashkent and Chirchik, this was the first time I had seen the Tian Shan, except when I attended the institute at the Husman Sport Camp. I had to cross the ocean to visit my native mountains. How beautiful they were. The mountain spurs could be seen far ahead for many miles; they seemed to go on endlessly. The narrow road wound around like a huge snake. Now it was hiding behind a sharp turn, now it was plunging down abruptly, now it was becoming wider, only to narrow again beyond the next hill, and it seemed that heavy rocks would squish the sides of the car. Now and then, the road would suddenly become almost vertical, like a rearing horse, and our straining engine would rage and roar. It was a hard and beautiful road, carved through the mountains as early as the 1920s, making this land accessible to people. The road would become blocked around the passes only during bad snowstorms.

I was looking through the window without a break, eagerly, with a feeling of sweet pain. Mama sat next to me in the car since we were on our way to see the healer in Namangan, and our misfortune was riding along with us. Still, this road and these mountains were doing something for my soul with every passing second, every passing hour. One could say that they distracted me from my somber thoughts. No, that's the wrong way to put it. They didn't distract me – the pain was inside me – they filled me with something else. And the road was streaming, whirling, falling, hiking rapidly up and up, now almost running into a rock, now heading for the river bubbling among the boulders, now receding from it and reappearing somewhere far down below, at a bend or in the valley, so calm and peaceful, somewhere in the endless expanse, beyond the haze of the hills.

One of those little valleys, green and inviting, appeared in our path, and we stopped for a short rest. It was time for Mama to take a break, and we also needed to fill the tanks with gas from the extra fuel can. Here, we naturally wouldn't find any of those gas stations we were so used to on the

highways in America. Even if we came across a gas station, gas there was worth its weight in gold. Though we could see other things, fondly remembered and cherished from childhood. Trees, as tall and slender as ship masts grew on the sides of the road. A row of half a dozen stands could be seen in their shade. It was a small roadside market, a pleasure for travelers when they reached the pass. Here one could quench one's thirst with kumis (mare's milk), buy fragrant honey and freshly toasted sunflower seeds, feast on *kurt*

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