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THE CHARACTER OF THE UZBEKS

Let me tell you a story.

My classmates and I were sent to pick cotton when we were third year university students. We had to go to a kolkhoz* in the Boka region. The kolkhoz was situated in the outskirts of the region. The place looked like the Surkhon oasis, where you can see grassy sedges at every step. There were reeds everywhere, and the land was full of fingered plant. This land was perfect for grazing cattle or playing chillak[i] . Dear friend, I am telling you this because I liked the land and my soul enjoyed it. I love these kinds of beautiful places!

In short, behind this fingered place there was a little village. About twenty or thirty families lived there. The houses had clay plaster roofs and the walls were made of rammed earth. When we reached the village all the rooftops were covered with hay. There had been a short rain. The hay was yellow. There were children on some of the rooftops. They started to yell when saw us. They were poor children... Our car stopped on a stony street. The teachers made an agreement and we turned and got out. We were to stay at the unfinished terrace house of a brigadier. The house was plastered with straw. There were no doors or windows. It was damp.

The house was not any different from the usual barracks. A lot of the students were from Fergana, Tashkent and other regions, and a lot of them were older than I was. Some of them had started university after finishing secondary school or after their army service. Me and my group had started university right after tenth grade. I should say that as far as literacy goes we weren't behind them. Sometimes we were actually smarter than they were. We had come to the university right after finishing tenth grade when our knowledge was still fresh. And as you know, I'm an active reader of the public library.

But we were shy, and it's true that we were more provincial than the vodiya[ii] and Tashkent boys. Maybe we were more stupid than them in certain

matters of agility. You may say no, but when someone takes you and puts you somewhere you may not know what to do in that situation. As for pulling things out, can you haul over that stove which is being used in the kolkhoz's office by the accountant? Can you? No. Do you know what to put in place of a window? Lambskin? Where can you find it? That's what I'm talking about — agility. And some of my course mates also seemed to me like the grasping sort.

There was a person in charge of our class who was a student of the same year. His name was Ormon. He was tall and thin. For three years he had been unsuccessful in passing the university exams. For three years he had carried tomatoes and onions to Siberia to sell. If you listened to his train journey adventures you would be astonished. And they were prudent and thrifty guys! Our Azimjon[iii], the Komsomol[1] organizer, always read Remark and Hemingway and used to say that our own writers were liars. But I disagreed with him!

So, we got settled. We covered the ground with straw and covered the ceiling with a tent. Then we laid down the beds. Some guys found a bucket and a kettle. The afternoon was drawing to a close. As you know it's really hard to sleep in a strange place the first night. So the guys began telling anecdotes: “Afandi[iv] who you know...”

All the good places were “occupied” by other students so I had to make a place near the door. In the morning I felt like I had caught a cold, probably during the night when the door was open. That morning there were dark, heavy clouds in the sky. I could barely see the cotton fields. It was after the second harvest and most of the cotton plants had shed their leaves and had yellowed. Leaning on the column of the veranda I looked out over the land. There were mulberry trees bordering the cotton field. Those mulberry trees, just like at home. Here and there were flocks of starlings. There was a dull white building on the other side of the cotton field, and a water tank. Probably something was boiling there; there was a reddish fire under its smokestack. Down below I could see a shanty on the edge of a narrow irrigation channel which was between us and the cotton field. Its roof was also covered with straw. Starlings were hopping about on the roof. Sapparboy — my

Karakalpak[v] friend, was running on the beach in his undershirt. I headed down there to wash my face and hands.

— Take off your clothes! Run! Get some exercise! – called Saparboy.

— Oh no! I'm not in shape. – I said, and then noticed that the shanty was someone's house.

I was astonished — I had thought it was just a shack. But there was a little window. And do you know what was in front of the house? A weaver's loom. A woman was weaving a small carpet and moving a skein through the threads. I went closer to her. This sight was dear to my heart, so dear! The woman noticed my silhouette and pulled her kerchief down over her forehead.

— Good morning! Do not be tired, sister!—I said.

— Come, brother, welcome. Did you settle in well?

— Yes, thank you. We're staying up there. Do you live in this house?

— Yes, – she answered. – My husband has gone to take care of the animals.

— Have you got a herd to tend?

— Yes, the kolkhoz gave us herd.

“Herd!” Oh yes! You do not hear this word in Tashkent, kind reader. Thus I felt something warm in my heart when hearing this.

— Do you keep sheep or goats in your herd?

— Both.

I saw a long pen at the other side of the shanty. The pen's round interior was surrounded with a fence of dry branches. I slowly stepped toward the pen. There was a smell of dung. Oh yes! I looked inside. It could hold seventy or eighty small cattle. For some reason I had thought these people didn't know anything but cotton, but I was wrong. Now I was happy. I even liked the cotton more because of the cattle. And the weather was nice. The cotton plants were rain-washed and wet. The leaves and stalks of the cotton plants were yellowish. Clear water was flowing in the waterway. Oh those times! There was clear water in the Boka region too. It seems to me that they didn't use chemicals as much as they do today. But at the time I

wasn't paying much attention to that kind of thing. Those days nobody in my village ever talked about chemicals or polluted water.

In short, this panorama was helping me feel more like myself in a far corner of the Surkhon[vi] region, where I was born. At that moment other students started coming out of the terrace house rubbing their half-asleep eyes. They went to the right and left. Some of them joined Sapar and went running with him. Others went to the cotton field. Brother Ormon came up to the woman who was weaving on the carpet loom.

– How are you, sister? Do not be tired![vii]

– Be here[viii], live long, little brother! Your visit is splendid...

– It is unfair not to help to you. Do you have any green tea?

– Yes, I have.

Putting the weaver's comb down and lowering her hem the woman walked into the shanty. She wore an old pair of kersey boots* on her feet. There was a hair clasp at the end of her long hair. Her discolored chemise was crumpled. After some time she came out holding a jar and sheet of newspaper. She gave the newspaper to Ormon and inclined the jar over the paper. About a handful of tealeaf spilled out onto the paper.

– That's enough! Thank you.—said Ormon.

– If you need more...

– If we need more I'll come back.

– You're welcome, dear brother! Here you are! Oh this cotton... You left your lessons and your parents to come here. Let God make bounty your companion. Thank you...

– We have to pick cotton!—said brother Ormon. — By the way, how much will we be paid for a kilogram of cotton?

– Five or ten kopecks. I don't know exactly.

– Oh no! That’s terrible!—said brother Ormon, then laughed.—Maybe brother-in-law[ix] knows it, does he?

– Yes, he knows.

– OK. Did you also move out here?

– No, we’re local people.

– You have another house, don’t you?

– No, dear brother. This is our only house and it’s not bad. There are only three of us. Your nephew has gone with his father. He wants to become a shepherd. He’ll come in pretty soon. Where will you have your meals?

– Meals? Hmm...Today we’ll have it here. — He showed the place where we were staying.—later we’ll think about it.

It might seem that I’m describing brother Ormon as an insidious and avaricious person. But he was true to himself and cared about us too.

After that we went to the gathering. The sun had risen and it and it was shining and turning yellow. With our hooking aprons[x] we were walking like happy shepherds to the owner’s houses for the oshhalol[xi]. Oh my friend, despite the difficulties of walking down the wet path it was pleasant! Starlings were playing above us. Wet leaves were in our path. Here and there were cotton harvests and they were evaporating. Have you ever seen this? If it sits for a long time a cotton harvest will smoke.

That day we picked cotton, because shame is worse than death. I worked like the other students. But my nose was stuffed up. All day long I could hardly breathe.

On the way back we saw a boiling kettle at the shanty. Brother Azimjon went up to the kettle and smelled.

— This is pilaf, — he said, looking at us.

— Ah! The kettle is too small. —brother Ormon said.

— Let’s go, let’s go.

— Where are you rushing off to? Stop! Hey, young brother!

A lean, bearded man staggered out of the shanty. He had lantern jaws. The elbows of his black robe were torn and the cotton batting was coming out. He hurriedly came and greeted us.

— Welcome! Welcome! Come into our house, please, dear guests!

— We have to wash up first—said brother Ormon. — By the way, do you have any medicine here? One of my brothers is coughing and he can't breathe either. Isn't that right? — He looked at me. — Your medical supply station is way in the center of the region. This place is as remote as Kamchatka[xii].

— Sure, we have some medicine!

The man had put on his boots without leg wrappings. That's why he was waddling, and the boots made it difficult for him to reach the house. He came back out holding a bundle of nightshade.

— If you put it in a cloth and tie it on you'll have no problem with sore throats.

— He said.

— That's great! Just a little is enough. — I said.

— Hm! What will you be able to do with just a little? Take it all. You'll need it again. —brother Ormon said.

I arrived at our place holding the bundle of nightshade. I looked at the nightshade. It was so familiar. My dear, in my village there was an old woman. Her husband had been shot as an "enemy of the nation". He had given forage to the horses of the basmatchis[xiii]. The old woman was a mother who had lived her lonely life feeding the eleven stomachs that were the memory of her husband. Her children also died one by one and then she was married to my bow-legged grandfather. That old woman used to cure our throats with nightshade. If our tongue was ill she would treat the tip of the tongue with the powder of the bush flower. Then we were as healthy as if we had never been sick.

In our storeroom at home we had the exact same bundles of nightshade. Our grandmother used to hang them on a wooden stake.

So I also hung the nightshade on a nail on the wall. Then I took a handful of its fruit, crushed it in my palm and wrapped it up in a cloth. Then I tied it around my throat.

The next day I woke up healthy and went back to picking.

Tea samovars were boiling in front of the houses. There were unfenced lands behind the houses. That's where we were picking cotton. Here and there were some small field camps. Their grounds were damp, the walls were ramshackle. Dry soil raised dust around the camps. On the ground you could see the footsteps of mice and rats. Sometimes we used to take a break in those field camps. I liked to wander around those places. The field camps had been built by the waterways. On the banks of the waterways grew good-doer reed. There were different blossoming prickles and plants in the reedgrass meadow. We were the only ones who ever saw them. Sometimes we saw melon and watermelon lashes in the furrows. Of course, there were one or two green, wrinkled fruits, but if you broke and ate it would crack your tongue[xiv]. Oh my dear, maybe it just seemed that way to me, to such a poor student. Otherwise, how could I have called such a tasteless thing so sweet? Yes, well done! A man should not be so capricious. A human being should be patient. You know well that during cotton picking you are not always as full as a newborn lamb. Even a lenten fare which was made by boiling a piece of meat and macaroni together could make you happy. This is cotton picking!

Nowadays it has come into fashion to raise a cry about cotton picking and to call this the hardest labor in the world. On the one hand, it's true. But recall those romantic memories! Remember the sunrises and the wet tracks on the ground. Remember the bullock cart that raises dust on the road and the rays of the sun which harmonized with that dust so it turned into golden dust. Besides that, you felt like a man who is doing the greatest work an Uzbek can do, you felt like a man who is fighting for the honor of the Uzbeks. If some friend of yours picked too little cotton, he seemed like an enemy to you. And if you saw a girl who was barely picking any cotton with her soft hands covered with multiple cuts which were wrapped in gauze,

you would call that city coquette a slacker. It's true that I am speaking for myself. And should I finish my story.

Well! That evening when I got back to our place I was all wet. The next day I had to get up early and go picking. Rain or snow was nothing compared to the cotton picking. I washed my clothes and held them near the stove, but they only partially dried. A smart friend of mine advised me to wear them anyway. He said that they would dry soon. I did it. The following day this advice brought me something awful.

— You've got delicate health, poet! — Brother Ormon said.

It was becoming the custom to call a person a poet if he was delicate and a dreamer. This phrase was used for the first time by the editorial staff. I was in the history-archeology group and there were boys who had contacts with the editorial offices. I also wanted to know what ideas they were talking about in the editorial offices.

But I had begun to tell about the previous day's adventures. After returning from the girl's barracks, brother Azimjon scolded me:

— If you separate from your group you will be eaten by a predator. You left us without telling anyone. We looked for you a long time.

— Oh! The place was...

Saparboy, the Karakalpak boy, was my kindred spirit. I thought maybe because of some mutual similarities the Karakalpaks count some of the Surkhon people as close to them. Everybody knows this well. Back then we were friends and like-minded.

— You stay here. Don't go to the picking. I will gather two aprons of cotton. —Saparboy said to me.

Picking two aprons of cotton is really hard work! It means you have to lower and raise your body at least two or three thousand times. And there are other hardships to it. I felt bad. I didn't know how to thank him. My head began to swim. My body was burning.

You stay here. The picking isn't more important than your life. — Brother Azimjon said.

Look how practical they were. I didn't go cotton picking, the other boys went. But there was a clause for the sick person who stays at home--He should sweep and put the house in order. Hoping to get it over with I swept the room at once. I cleaned the terrace too. I threw the garbage behind the house. When I was coming back in I saw this panorama: A ten or twelve year old child was sitting leaning on his elbows at the side of a cornfield, in the lee of the wild broom groves. He was looking out at the beyond. On the other side, under a harvest of straw which was piled up to the cob wall, a yellow dog was lying. Taking interest I went over to the boy. Then the dog got up and howled as it jumped over the wall. After awhile it came back with a fist sized puppy on its mouth. It put the puppy down and licked it. Then it lay down again.

— That's really interesting, isn't? — I said.

The child gave a start from my voice. His face was dirty. The ear flap of his fur cap was over his forehead.

— Yes, it is. — He answered, concerned. — But this is a street. Some children might take the puppy away with them, so I put it in our courtyard. Then the dog brought it back here again, to its den. But the courtyard is better than here.

I sighed.

— It's because this is her home. Whose son are you?

The human being is very interesting, isn't he? What did it matter whose son he was?

— I am the son of Botir[xv] the shepherd.—he answered.

— Are you? Has he gotten any awards from the government?

— No, — he looked sad. — Eshimboy[xvi] got an award. But he doesn't have any more sheep than my father.

Look! Even children know these machinations.

— Don't worry. Your father will also be awarded. Botirboy is a skillful shepherd. Your house is behind this wall, isn't it?—I asked.

— Oh, no! — He said, laughing at me. — That one is our house. I was looking out through the window when my father gave you the nightshade. Do you need more? Your eyes are watering.

— No! I have enough. Do you have any brothers?

— My little brother died. The midwife said he was premature. He's dead. We buried him. He was too little.

— How sad! — I said.

Since we'd gotten there I had been observing the condition of this family. The woman would get up before sunrise, get the yield of milk, see her husband off to work and then set to weaving. When the sky cleared up she would go to the cotton field behind the waterway. Then she'd pick cotton until evening. Then the beach of the waterway would be lighted up until midnight by the light shining from the only window of their shanty. Brother Ormon, brother Azimjon and three or four other guys were often their guests and joined them for dinner. "It's really hard for this woman. Maybe that's why she had a miscarriage in childbirth" I thought, when thinking about these things. Do you know, my dear, even though our eyes were open we were weak. You know such peasants too, who live in shanties in bad condition. Of course I'm right. But we didn't want to acknowledge it, did we? What base men we were.

I regret it! But we felt too abashed to admit to this reality. We hid it from others too. But you must not jump to conclusions. Do you think that it was only because of fear? I doubt it. You know the Uzbek well: In spite of his situation, he has respect for his guests. He tries to hide his poor condition. Isn't that interesting? In actual fact, a poor man should habituate himself to his conditions. But for some reason ours are peculiar... As if he was rich and had suddenly become poor. That's why he is displeased and tries to hide his reality. At least it seems that way to me. Or maybe there are other reasons which our minds can't understand. The child's name was Abdukodir. We arrived at the terrace together.

— Don't touch the dog. Your house is good for you. For the dog, her house is good for her.

— Bad boys will steal the puppy and sell it.—Abdukodir said.

— Whom will they sell it to?

— They will sell it. A local Korean bought six dogs and took them with him.

— Do you go to school?—I asked.

— Yes, fifth grade. We go to school in the afternoon for awhile. Then we go break cotton boll.

— What about your studies?

— They stop!—he laughed. —Next year we'll also be taken out to go picking! Even now I pick cotton. I help my mother. Do you mean reading books? I read a book. I've got "Robinson Crusoe". A medical assistant gave it to me last year. She came to see my brother. I cried. Then she gave me this book. It's a nice book!

My dear, I read this book when I was his age too. So did you... What similar biographies! Am I dilly-dallying? Where are you hurrying off to, dear? There are times when we should talk and think to our heart's content. We dream of other times as if living them again. What can you say? These memories refresh a man's heart. Here's what I have to say-- our hearts are full of lechery and useless vices. Take the cigarette. So, I made friends with Abdukodir.

Our girls were staying at the barracks behind the mulberry plantation. Two of them also got sick. The doctor came. He looked at me too and gave me some pills. For three days I slept heavily. It was probably on the fourth day when I saw Botir the shepherd walking below carrying a watermelon under his arm. That day in the afternoon the sky cleared up and it turned very hot. Near evening when I was sitting under the columns of the terrace, Abdukodir came up to me with half a watermelon. It was half of the watermelon which his father had brought home...

— This is for you. Eat the watermelon. My father sent it for you. My mother said it would be good for you. Then they asked you to come to our house in the evening.

— I won't eat it, thank you. I'm full. — I said.

— No! You should eat it! — He said it as if he wanted to fight me. — You're ill and this watermelon is good for your health.

— I won't eat it.

Abdukodir stood up. After placing the watermelon on the ground he ran away. The boys came back. Then Botir the shepherd came up and invited us to his house. Abdukodir had been right.

— Young brothers, come to us in the evening. We are preparing a pinch of pilaf to thank you. You are here without your parents.

— Ohn no! We are too many. There will not be enough room for all of us.—Brother Ormon said.

— If our soul is wide we will find room. Don't worry. Come.—Botir the shepherd said.

— But you know we are twenty people!

— In that case, guys, today ten of us will go and the others will go another day— Brother Ormon said.

Though I protested they brought me over. It was a room where 4 people could barely sit. There was a brick stove in the corner. It was whitewashed, but you could see spots of tea and oil on its surface. On the ground the carpet was folded in two. There was a niche which was full of goods. Narrow quilts were laid down. We huddled together. Botir the shepherd spread the tablecloth on the ground, smiling. He was happy. He put pairs of baked flat cakes on the cloth. He placed a saucer of lump sugar on the tablecloth and put out two handfuls of oleaster and raisins. He prepared green tea in a big crockery teapot. The two dishes of pilaf disappeared quickly. The boys began to drink tea continuously. I was not feeling like myself. Maybe it was because of my illness or because of my capricious attitude.

But I was ashamed to eat even a piece of bread. They were a poor family.

— The cotton picking has achieved active progress. What about your life here? — Brother Ormon asked, and continued. —You're saving up, aren't you? Am I right? This is the tradition of the Uzbek: he saves up everything for his child.

--Because our fathers have done so. —Botir the shepherd answered.—I got married and we laid a table for our people and took their blessings. It was a wedding and you know it can't happen without expenses.

— But you know, brother, they are lying to us. Our daily labor does not defray the cost of our daily food. A kilogram of cotton is ten kopecks. Nowadays it is harder than death to pick ten kilograms of cotton.

— But we can bear it, dear brother. This is our cotton and this is our government.

— Hmm! I never understood how that works.

The woman was looking at me.

— This young brother did not taste anything. Or does he treat us as mud, set us on his feet?

— Oh! Why?—I felt a burning inside, like something was wrong --I am...

— Maybe you don't have any appetite? Otherwise, how can a human being be so shy in front of a meal? — said brother Ormon.

— Yes, he's right, I don't have any appetite.

I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. I was tired of brother Ormon's questions. What? Oh my dear, don't think I don't understand anything. Brother Ormonjon was true to himself. But there was another side of the question. We were never full during those times. One of the students would bring a half kilogram of candy, and another student would steal it. Someone's share was stolen by someone else. I barely have the heart to say it. A human being is incensed by these realities. So what should I have done? Should I have stretched out my hand for their food? Leave your opinions out, Brother! In that situation you would also have kept to yourself like me.

After that I didn't go back to their house. The shepherd would ask, the wife would ask, the son would call... I would say "OK". But then I would put it off. I hated the guys who used to go over there every other day and divide up the share of that family. Step by step I broke off relations with them. Then something happened which you can't even imagine.

It began to rain continuously. For two days we had no visits from the outside. For two days we were hungry. To make matters worse, most of the students became debtors. With time our guys had gotten used to wandering through the village. They started to bring back ten or fifteen melons and watermelons at night. The next day

there would be fights at headquarters. Someone would come complaining to the chief about someone stealing something from him. Look at that! We were learning how to steal.

But the greatest thievery was this...

There was a storm one night. Unexpectedly Botir the shepherd opened the door with a powerful shove. He was sopping wet.

— My herd ran away! Help me, brothers! I don't know what frightened them!—he said.

Like the others, we went out and searched for the sheep and goats. Now you know there are a lot of dogs in village streets. Maybe a wolf had frightened the herd? But on the contrary, it was raining cats and dogs. Oh my! We searched for a long time. We found some of the sheep in the cotton fields, others in the streets and houses. The shepherd stood at the door with a pleading look in his eyes. He thanked us. The woman gave us her blessing. Their son was happy... But we could not find one lamb.

— I'll find it. You relax. If I find the lamb I will slaughter and cook one of my own two sheep. — Botir the shepherd said to us.

— That would be great. Do it, brother! We'll be able to all eat meat till we're full— Brother Ormon said.

We came back to our place. If I told you that after that wandering around in the rain I was breathing hoarsely, it would make you angry. OK! So it's better to say: that night five or six boys in our group caught colds. At 2 or 3AM I woke up. I was not feeling well and was hardly breathing. The door was half opened and the wind was coming in. I pulled it shut, but the door opened again. It seemed like the door has warped. I jumped out of bed. When I took the handle someone pulled the door back to the other side. Then I pulled it back again. I was scared. I opened the door wide, and there was brother Azimjon.

— Hey! Come here! Put your clothes on! — He said.

I put my robe on. When I went out I saw brother Ormon and Mirzagolib[xvii], a strongman, at the column. Mirzagolib was older than I was. His nickname was “the

chairman”. He was very cautious. He used to put cotton in his ears because he was afraid of centipedes.

Brother Azimjon closed the door.

— Let’s go. There’ll be talk. What should have happened has happened. You, poor boy, should also enjoy it.—he said.

— But you’d better keep this really secret.—brother Ormonjon said.

I followed them. Brother Ormonjon led the way. The rain had stopped, but there was a keen wind carrying the breathe of cold days. It was trying to open our collars and beat on our chests. This time even the dogs were silent. We were going along the edges of the road which had brought us to the village. We were walking away from the village. We walked a long time. My nose cleared and I was able to breathe easily.

— Where are we going? – I asked several times.

They kept silent. Then...I felt happy. It was delightful to go somewhere in the night to do some secret work! We left the village behind. We reached a place full of sedge and palm. There were several dogs there, but as soon as they saw us they ran away. We were following brother Ormonjon. In some places the reeds were burnt. There was a smell of wet ashes. The wet ground was crunchy. In short, we had come to a place that looked like a jungle. The reeds were as tall as a man. At that time I heard the faint voice of a lamb’s “baa”. But I still hadn’t gotten the aim of this adventure. Eventually we stepped into the reedbed. Brother Ormonjon switched on his flashlight. After a while we stood above a place where a black lamb was tied. It was damp. It was looking at us with its pleading look.

— Good job. — Brother Ormonjon said. — I was afraid of stray dogs. Ergashvoy[xviii] you know cattle well. Dogs also eat lambs, don’t they?

— Such events happen. — I answered. — But whose lamb is this?

— Ours... it’s ours now. Mirzagolib begin! Here’s my knife, it’s sharp. But use it carefully. Bones will make it dull.

Now I realize that back then I was really naive.

— Are you going to slaughter this poor lamb?—I asked.

— Get out of here! And look around carefully!

— No! But whose lamb is this? Maybe it's the lamb of the kolkhoz or maybe... Hey! This is Botir the shepherd's lamb, is'nt it?

— Here's a fine kettle of fish! What did I tell you?—brother Ormonjon said, turning me around by my shoulders.—Get out of here! So now we've got a guy who stands up for the kolkhoz! Damn the Kolkhoz! We'll die of starvation here for the kolkhoz! If Botir is deprived of one of his lambs he will not die of hunger!

— But, your conscience...

Could this sentence have appealed to their conscience? No! At that time there was nothing I could do, I could only hate them. I burst out sobbing in frustration. I took two steps toward the village, and then stopped. I guess I was afraid of telling on my friends. And I was afraid of being alone. Despite everything, I understood that their work was the result of hunger, that they were desperate. I knew that desperation could not be used as a basis to excuse them, but it was the only consolation of my heart. Maybe I was lying to myself. In short, although I did not eat one piece of that lamb's meat, I was a partner in the crime.

Brother Ormonjon and brother Azimjon were rather afraid of me and just goggled at me for about a week. I stopped talking to them. What could I say?

Yes, they slaughtered the lamb. Mirzagolib slaughtered it. They quickly stripped the skin off the lamb and threw away its head and legs. Then they fired up a pile of reeds. They cooked the liver over the fire in a cauldron. I said I would not eat it. I was like an anorexic. "I hate all of you!" I said at last. Then I waited for them. Oh yes! You won't dare to tell the truth to the shepherd, I said to myself. Then I left. I got into bed and slept. For some reason I wanted to cry. I felt sorry for Botir the shepherd and his wife. Then I took pity on the guys. Yes I did! I don't know when they got back. But I did notice that for three or four days they ate fried mutton.

No...They didn't do it at our place. They fried the mutton at the girls' place, because the girls were also not in heaven, my dear friend. You writers are very whimsical people. You imagine a good person is as fresh as milk and as harmless as a turtle-dove. But it's as clear as day that there is not one guiltless man in this world. This kind of man can only live in the world of ideas. Yes, it's true! Your ideas can look

like the words of “the moral code of the man in communist society”. The code commands men to observe it. Some people count on the words of the code to rule their lives. But they are nonsense words.

Days passed. A light snow began to fall. You know in our town, in the mountains, it’s like a fairytale to take a walk this time of year. But here in the frosty days we were breaking cotton boll and pulling the wet cotton out. Two men were brushing snow from the cotton plants by holding a rope on both sides. Then, shaking with cold, we leaned into the furrows. We were gathering “white silver”. When this “white silver” goes into an apron it becomes as small as a fist. It was wet. What can I say? I don’t know how they dry and deliver it. But I have seen the rotting piles of wet cotton.

Then we began gathering the cotton boll.

By that time our friends—brother Ormonjon, brother Azimjon, Mirzagolib and their companions, had gotten accustomed to going to the shepherd’s house when it was cold or when our tea was not ready in time. They huddled together there. The shepherd and his wife were so happy! I became a lone wolf. No, I did not go in their house at all. How could I?

Now listen to the rest of this story. It was about time to return home. The cotton picking was finished. But you know very well that no teacher or foreman will ever tell you your departure day in advance. I never understood why they won’t tell you. Maybe they think the students will cool off on gathering cotton. But strangely enough this time all the students were informed about it in advance. Botir the shepherd also knew about it. The day before our departure he came by with his wife. I felt anxious for some reason or other.

Brother Ormon greeted the guests.

— Come in, dear guests!—He said.

Brother Azimjon ordered the boys to lay a quilt on the ground. Bowing to us, Botir the shepherd came in as if wishing not to offend our hearts. He asked us to be his guest again.

— That was my word and promise. I have said it. I have promised to kill an animal. That is why we are asking you to come to our house. Here is your sister. She invites you also.

In depths of my heart I fainted away.

— This is uncomfortable. We didn't find your lamb that night—brother Ormonjon said.

— Yes, it seems that night we didn't search well enough—brother Azimjon said. Apparently he was also was feeling some discomfort.

— Oh my brothers!—the shepherd smiled.—this is uncomfortable for us. Can you believe it? Do not stray too far away from the goal, brothers! The lamb was found. My wife can prove it. Am I right?—he looked at his wife.—we found it in Shoditokay[xix]. We had also lost all hope. But we found it. If you want to make us happy come to our house. Before you leave you will be our guests.

Then he said that they would also finish the picking. They would only pick the cotton plant and would break the cotton boll at home.

— There are two Greek men in the village. Their homemade wine is unique. We've already bought some.

Are you astonished, dear friend? I was astonished, of course!

That night they made merry at their house until midnight. Then the merriment continued outside. I was pretending to sleep. The boys came in and began mumbling about me.

Most of them were drunk. It's hard to believe the words of drunken men. But you're right - what you are waiting for happened: Remorse! One after another they expressed it. It seems that all of them had tasted that meat. Brother Azimjon's explanation is still in my mind:

— We are vile creatures! — He said groaning.—we did an evil deed and we knew it. How can we call ourselves Uzbek? Those people are the true Uzbeks! Am I right, Ormonjon?

— We are depraved.—muttered brother Ormonjon.—but life makes men do it.

— But life doesn't make them do evil deeds.

— How's that?

— So...maybe we can gather money and give it to them?

If we've got any money!

Then they began to talk about me again. One of them, I did not recognize who, stood up and said:

— Let me kick Ergashvoy. In my opinion he's worse than a dog. He's always laughing at us. Bobtail! Lone wolf!

— Don't pay any attention to him. You'll face a lot of those kinds of people in life... I'm not telling this story for the purpose of boasting about myself. Nowadays I'm worse than they were. I don't give up my share easily. I don't treat every authority like a person. It's true that I've learnt a few things since then.

But yes, I'll continue the story. The next day flakes of snow were falling. They were falling so beautifully and delightfully. You see this kind of snowfall only in the mountains.

A number of buses formed a line in the street. The guys were happy. At last they were returning to the university lecture halls. I was on the terrace with my luggage. I wanted to thank and express my gratitude to Botir the shepherd and his wife. Because I liked them! Oh - They were coming!

— Welcome! Thank you, Ormonjon! Thanks also to you Azimjon! Thank you to all of you! Look here! You've lived here with us like a friendly team. We cannot value you enough—Botir the shepherd said.

He shook everyone's hands. But when he came near me he turned his back and walked away. Then his wife also shook the hands of the guys with her laboring, callous hands. But when she reached me she also turned her back and walked away from me.

Trembling, I went up to them.

— Brother Botir, sister...I like you. Don't be angry with me.—I said.

— No, you do not like us! You did not like us from the very beginning.—said the woman.

— She’s right, brother! You were inconsiderate of our relations. Those guys are different—the shepherd said.

— No! I have nothing but respect for you.

— Nonsense! –Botir the shepherd’s wife said.

— Yes, she’s right. – The husband added.

Abdukodir was looking at me strangely.

— They’re right.

You may ask what I saw here and what conclusion I made. I saw here the sweet-tempered, modest behavior and native nature of the Uzbeks. When I got into the bus I was crying, looking at the snowfall through the window. I was crying for the naïveté of these Uzbeks. In spite of all bareness and difficulties they had not changed their gentle attitude and their miraculous, legendary hospitability. These humane features were still alive in their instincts. That is why I was happy, and this happiness made me cry from my heart.

I’m sorry if our conversation was all about the Uzbeks and their surprising character. There is truth in every story you tell. But today I told you a story which was close to my heart, dear. And that’s why its effect on me was so special.

1988.

Translated by Shuhrat Sattorov

[1] **Komsomol** – (formerly) the youth association of the Soviet Union for 14- to 26-year-olds.(translator’s note)

* **kolkhoz** – A collective farm

[I] **Chillak**- A child’ game which is played by beating sticks against each other.

[II] **Vodiy**- is name of a geographical place. Vodiy means oasis. There are three regions of Uzbekistan in the vodiy.

[III] **Azimjon** – is a man's name.

[iv] **Afandi** – is the name of the hero of many Uzbek anecdotes.

[v] **Karakalpak** – is a geographical name.

[vi] **Surkhon** – is the southern region of Uzbekistan.

[vii] **Do not be tired** – A wish to the person who is working.

[viii] **Be here** – An answer to the wish. It means you should also not be tried.

kersey boots* – army boots

[ix] **Brother-in-law** – he is referring to the woman's husband

[x] **As hooking apron** – style of tying an apron. One side of the apron is tied below the waist, the other side around the neck – then the cotton can be stuffed in and carried.

[xi] **Oshhalol** – A meal for shepherds. After tending a herd the shepherds are given a meal by the owners of the herd. (oshhalol-in the Uzbek language means a meal which is earned by honest work)

[xii] **Kamchatka** – is an outlying district of the Russian Federation. In the text it means as far away as Kamchatka.

[xiii] **Basmatchi** – is anti-Bolshevik fighters in Uzbekistan from 1917-1926.

[xiv] **To crack the tongue** – This means very sweet.

[xv] **Botir** – is a man's name.

[xvi] **Eshimboy** – is a man's name.

[xvii] **Mirzagolib** – is a man's name.

[xviii] **Ergashvoy** – is a man's name.

[xix] **Shoditokay** – is the name of a place.