



ROLLAN

РОЛЛАН СЕЙСЕНБАЕВ

SEISENBAYEV

THE DAY THE WORLD COLLAPSED

# **Роллан Сейсенбаев**

## **День, когда рухнул мир**

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### **Аннотация**

Роллан Сейсенбаев – признанный классик казахской литературы. Его романы, повести, рассказы издавались в самых престижных журналах и издательствах России, Англии, Америки, Германии, Италии, Венгрии, Польши, Японии и Кубы.

Роллан Сейсенбаев награжден «Золотым офицерским крестом» Польши, «Золотым Рыцарским Крестом» Венгрии, орденом «Дружбы» Кубы за заслуги перед литературой. Он является обладателем множества международных литературных премий.

Крупнейшие критики мира называют рассказы Роллана Сейсенбаева жемчужинами. Поистине Он уникальный Мастер слова.

Роллан Сейсенбаев стал своеобразным эталоном современной казахской интеллектуальной прозы.

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# **Роллан Сейсенбаев**

## **День, когда рухнул мир**

### **THE DAY THE WORLD COLLAPSED**

#### **The story**

*Translated by Alexandra Nadezhdina*

*To the victims of nuclear tests and ecological catastrophes.*  
**The Author**

### **THE BOOK IS THE MOST PATIENT TEACHER**

There are three global tasks standing before the mankind today. They are: defence of peace, safeguarding spirituality and nature protection. These are the fundamental conditions for our further existence. Each of them is incomplete without another. The future of not only Kazakhstan but whole the world depends on these three elements.

We will be ever facing Hamlet's question «To be or not to be» concerning tomorrow's mankind, if we do not listen to the voice of prudence.

The technical development of the world has progressed leaps and bounds. Thereby the man became a spendthrift wasting natural resources. His creative energy is spent in vain, and he loses the ability to embrace the richest ocean of the culture and the thought, collected by the previous generations drop by drop.

Unfortunately, we are far from realising this fully. The intellectual and ideological vacuum leads people to avoiding reality and casts them down into the abyss of spiritual, moral and physical decadency.

The third millennium demands our pledge to establishing harmony at our common home – the Planet Earth.

The only meaning of the book is its pristine, lofty, sacred and exalted one which has served as man's most powerful weapon in protecting culture and spirituality.

It is the book that brings knowledge and culture to the mankind.

The book keeps the mystery of the human race's being.

The book is the fruit of human thought dowered with the breath of time and space.

The mankind has entrusted its sacred insights and soul revelations to the book. It is the book only that can teach marching ahead, avoiding cataclysms and climbing up the apogees of humanity.

The book is the most patient teacher.

It is the book only that can unmistakably teach us good from evil, truth from falsity.

There is nothing dearer to an intellectual than the book!

The 200-volume Library of Magazine «AMANAT» published by Abay International Club is dedicated to the 10th Anniversary of the Independent Kazakhstan.

We are bequeathing our only and most complete will to the youth as the future of our country. It is the Book.

I do support this noble action of the Abay Club.

I am genuinely glad of this endeavour by Mr. Rollan Seisenbaev, a prominent writer, – the foundation of the Magazine «AMANAT» and 200-volume Library of the Magazine.

I am sure that true patriots of the country will support and assist his aspirations to serve the culture and the spirituality of the Fatherland.

I wish the attentive and grateful reader to the new edition.

I congratulate Kazakstanis upon issuing the first volumes of the «AMANAT Magazine Library – Literature, Art, History, Philosophy, Education and Religions of the peoples of the world».

Love the book, protect it, and be devoted to it.

**Nursultan Nazarbayev,  
The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
14 March 2001  
Astana**



And then he heard a distant familiar voice.

«I can't breathe... Son...»

He muttered in his sleep:

«Father, Father, don't go away, Father. I beg you. I loved you so much. I love you so. We must talk. We have so much to talk about now.»

«Can you hear how our eternal land trembles, my son?»

«I can't hear, I feel nothing... I live far from my native land; I live in Moscow. All I can see from my window are the serrated blocks of newly erected concrete buildings stretching to the horizon.»

«It heaves and shifts, it moans and weeps. Are you, the living, not aware of this?»

«Do you think the earth can weep?...»

«Have the living become totally deaf? The moans which tear at the depths of one's soul, the weeping which rends the Universe, have they fallen on deaf ears? Once again atomic experiments are being carried out in your homeland! Once again a Satanic fire gnaws at the inner bowels of the earth! And the earth! The earth rages once more in search of mercy and protection. Have you forgotten how, many years ago, a hydrogen bomb was exploded in the Genghiz Hills?»

«I remember, Father, I remember... I can never forget that day of hell. My dreams are pervaded with the discordant, multi-voiced horror of that day. I wake up in the middle of the night in a sweat, with unseeing eyes...»

«Even now I often tremble at the sound of underground explosions! Suffering and pain! Suffering and pain! In the interests of science! In the interests of the national economy! One hundred and fifty kilotons! The atom! The atom!»

«Father,» I shouted. «Father, are you alive? Weren't you buried in the old Kazakh cemetery near the pine forest on the steep bank of the Irtysh?»

Silence. Quiet. Nothingness.

IN THE INTERESTS OF SCIENCE.

IN THE INTERESTS OF THE NATIONAL ECONOMY.

TO DEVELOP MILITARY TECHNOLOGY.

In Semipalatinsk the earth trembled, the windows shattered and in a shepherd's hut at the foot of the Genghiztau a young woman trembled in the pangs of birth. The child, a boy, did not wish to leave his mother's womb, did not want to set foot in this turbulent, grinding world. More than its mother, the foetus seemed to sense what would be happening on the earth at the moment of his birth. The soundless, gaping mouth, the distorted face, the wild eyes intently followed the actions of the old neighbour who had taken charge of the birth – catching sight of this expression the old midwife gave a cry of surprise – just then, a two kilogram baby boy emerged onto the soft felt mat...

«The day when the world collapsed...» I muttered the long-forgotten but suddenly remembered lines from my childish poem and a misty, grey cloud concealed my father's face and concealed his grave...

«Father, where are you?» I called hesitantly, but my voice disappeared into the threatening silence, a void enveloped my soul and with a shiver, I awoke.

It was quiet... the only sound was the dripping of a tap somewhere in the-kitchen. I drew back the curtains and saw the twilight of a Moscow dawn, creeping in through the window.

This is called «jogging», running at a trot, «fleeing from a heart attack». I ran in the direction of Sokolniki Park. A tram noisily clattered by. It was damp, cold and the streets were empty. My head was like a lead weight, my legs like cotton wool... No, today I would not get anywhere. I found myself amongst some trees. I stopped and slowly began to sway doing my exercises. The listlessness and apathy I felt would not leave me even after a cold shower and a coffee as strong as coal-tar. Only when I sat down at my desk, did something begin to stir inside me – my fatigue disappeared and my thoughts and words became clear.

The sharp, long-distance call made me start. I picked up the receiver and heard a distant, familiar voice – the voice of my mother.

«Aman, esenbisin, balam?... Hello, son...»

«Hello, Mother.»

I glanced at the clock. It was six in the morning. In Semipalatinsk it was already nine. Well, at least I wake up at the same time as my countrymen...

«Son, on the fourth of August it will be five years since your father's death. But I've invited friends and relatives over on the day after. I think this way it will be more convenient for everybody.»

«OK, Mum, don't worry, I'll be there.»

«We'll be expecting you, son... I hope I haven't disturbed you, son. You're probably as busy as always, aren't you? Don't overdo it, I beg you. Don't forget that your father's heart did not hold out, so do be careful, be careful...»

«Don't worry, Mum, don't worry, I hear you. I'm fine.»

I rang off; there was a short ring. I made a note on the desk calendar – 5th AUGUST, ANNIVERSARY OF FATHER'S DEATH. There was still one and a half weeks till the fifth. I sat down at the desk again, but of course, it was all gone. The words, as fluffy as cotton wool, would not rest on the white paper, and thoughts, what thoughts – where are they? I always breathe heavily, but today – what's happening to me today?...

«It's a bad day today,» I explained to myself.

It's a bad day. I pushed aside the fountain-pen, crossed my hands and put my head on the table, on these hands of mine.

I closed my eyes.

«Father, if it is not given to the living to comprehend the pain of the earth, then how do the dead sense it?»

«The dead are wiser than you, the living...»

I moved forward. I wanted to hold my father for a while, but at that moment I sensed the yawning gulf between us – he in the other world and I in this one... I wanted so much to help him get out of the grave, that I reached out to him with both hands.

«Be careful, you could fall and kill yourself,» warned my father who was wrapped up in a torn white shroud.

... And so disaster came to the people of the Genghiz Hills in the summer of 1953 – it came in a single hour. The children, tending the goats and sheep behind the village, all heard the terrible cries, screams and women weeping. Leaving the sheep and goats on the steppe, jostling each other as they ran, their bare feet flashing, they rushed to the village. What was taking place there was unimaginable – people were embracing each other, saying farewell, making vows and promises, shouting and weeping. Commotion, confusion, chaos – and we young boys were standing with our mouths open, unaware of the misfortune which had befallen the inhabitants of our quiet and cosy village. Perhaps, war had broken out? It dawned upon some of us that it might be a war against the Americans or some other imperialists and we greedily began to examine the enormous military vehicles and the soldiers rushing everywhere, all of whom seemed to have appeared from under the ground.

«Look, one, two, three. Each of these vehicles has ten wheels,» said Serikbol.

«This is really something... Ten, just like in a story,» we commented as we peered in trying to get into the cabin.

«If this is war, I'm going to join the partisans,» said Serikbol. We became envious, as he was the first to declare this – after all, each of us felt that he was either a soldier or at the very least the «son of a regiment».

«Come on, go home, lads!» shouted a lieutenant-colonel.

«Uncle, tell us – who are we fighting?» I asked him timidly.

«There is no war. Enough of your prattling. Off with you! Home! Your parents are waiting for you. You're going to be evacuated!» said the lieutenant-colonel angrily.

At that time we did not know what «evacuation» meant, but we immediately had a premonition of foreboding. This misty and mysterious word emanated fear and uncertainty.

Grandfather was oiling the wheels of the bullock cart in the yard.

«Give me a hand, grandson,» he beckoned to me.

I found out what was happening from him.

«We are being evicted,» he replied morosely.

«But, where to, why?» I said in amazement, secretly rejoicing at the unexpected turn of event – I, a seven-year-old, was tired of spending the summer holidays in the village, tending the hateful sheep. I had by that time read Mark Twain and yearned for new experiences with my whole being. I longed to travel and was ready to seek adventure even at the ends of the earth.

«To the town,» answered grandfather, reluctantly.

«Then, why are you preparing the bullock cart, if we are moving to town?» I said in surprise, and this suddenly utterly irritated grandfather.

«The town, the town,» he mimicked someone. «They've all pricked up their ears, repeating like parrots, 'the town, the town'. But what are we supposed to do with the livestock? We can't take them to the town, can we? Personally, I'm going to the hills. And you, what have you decided to do – are you coming with me or are you going with your mother?» Grandfather grilled me with his eyes and I looked away, without answering. I wanted so much to go to town! Auapa, my grandmother on my mother's side, lived there. Strict and imperious, she loved me and talked to me as if I was an adult. Thirty-five years have passed but I still can distinctly recall how, in the evenings, we used to sit on a city bench and engage in simple conversations. She spoke about everyone with wisdom – about her daughter, my mother, and her son-in-law, my father. Strangely enough, it seemed to me that she loved her son-in-law more than her daughter. She loved my father and she loved me.

And I did not raise my head, not knowing what to say to grandfather.

«So, it means that you're going to town, eh?»

It was difficult to judge by grandfather's voice whether he was really asking or jeering at me. I blushed and tried to evade his question.

«Let's wait and see what dad says...»

«What's there to see? It's plain enough. You're no golden eagle, no, no golden eagle,» grandfather cut me short. «Very well, off you go, I'll get by without you.»

I shuffled about awkwardly near him and then returned home. Mother and grandmother were tying up bundles; there was a real pogrom taking place in the house. My younger brother, hanging on to grandmother's skirt hem, was hovering under foot, whimpering. My one-year-old little sister was asleep.

«Take him outside and play with him,» said mother, pointing to my brother.

I took him in my arms and stepped into the yard. Grandfather silently looked at us both and then took up where he had left off.

«Not a golden eagle, not a golden eagle! As if he himself is a lion!» I mentally scolded grandfather.

Then we heard loud voices, a woman's weeping and several people entered our yard.

«What are we to do? We are lost! We are all lost!» wailed our neighbour, Grandmother Bokey.

«They say, this bomb possesses a barbaric strength, it is able to wipe all of Genghiztau off the face of the earth,» old Kabish echoed her.

«This bomb is worse than the American one which annihilated two Japanese cities. That one was atomic, and this one is hydrogen,» said the physics teacher.

«Oh, Moldabergen, what should we do?» wailed Grandmother Bokey.

«Prepare for the journey,» snapped grandfather sternly.

«But where's your son?» Bokey suddenly inquired.

«Where should he be? He's at work. They're folding a meeting with army officers at the District Committee,» explained Kabish.

«The authorities will decide what we are to do. A boss's command is law unto his subordinates,» said the physics teacher.

He had a reputation for being an honest and sober person. And he was «ever a coward – he had left for the front a private and returned from the war a lieutenant...

„What are we going to do with the livestock?“ said Kabish in confusion.

„Why, don't you know?“ said grandfather, looking at him sneeringly. „We'll take them to the hills. Or perhaps you want to take your Sheep into town? In that case, the townsfolk will call you a mutton-head.“

„Yes, of course, we can't take them into town,“ agreed Kabish promptly.

„And anyway, what are you hanging about for? We're leaving today or tomorrow, you know, and you're all standing about chattering idly.“ Grandfather suddenly became irritated again.

„Yes, you're right on all accounts,“ said the old lady, Bokey, blushing and hastily leaving the yard.

Just then the loudspeaker, which was suspended from a pole in the middle of the village, suddenly came to life – a metallic woman's voice announced:

„Comrades, please assemble in the square in thirty minutes for a meeting with the evacuation organizing committee.“

Soon the whole square was filled with the villagers. Amongst the anxious crowd were my grandfather and I.

On the platform among the military and the leaders of the district, I saw my father. He looked exhausted, his eyes were red with lack of sleep, but he spoke calmly and confidently. I will not attempt to reproduce the exact sense of his speech as I do not recall what was said by him or by the other speaker – a middle-aged officer with two large stars on his shoulders. He was the same lieutenant-colonel who had sent us home. That evening, father brought him and two other officers to our place. During dinner, from their brief remarks, I gathered that the inhabitants would be evacuated to the town of Ayaguz and those who so wished to Semipalatinsk, the regional centre. The old men had been given permission to go to the Genghiz Hills with the livestock. That is why had large military vehicles arrived at our village!

In the morning, the lieutenant-colonel said that we should only take with us what was absolutely necessary, to protect the windows with bales of straw and reassured the inhabitants that in a month's time they would all safely return home.

„And now, each of you is entitled to an allowance of five hundred roubles for the family from the District Committee Accounts Office,“ he said finally.

Five hundred roubles even in old money was for many a large sum. People signed with dignity the register which the accountant, Talgat, had prepared. Averting their eyes they quickly made their way home.

Only the lonely bachelor, Duisekhan, who had a reputation, in the village for being not all there, flatly refused to accept the unexpected offer of money.

„Duisekhan does not accept hand-outs,“ he shouted in incomprehensible anger, before leaving the meeting.

On the one hand, this stand of his amused the villagers, on the other, they were astonished by it. After all, Duisekhan was as poor as a church mouse and survived on what He earned from digging and cleaning wells and helping with the haymaking.

No one would hire Him permanently. He returned from the war late, about 1947, half out of his wits. Otegen, the NKVD officer, took Duisekhan's young, shapely wife to be his second wife.

Although no one in the village knew on which front Duisekhan had fought, the rumour had it that he had been held prisoner for a long time either by the Germans or by our authorities.

With the coming of spring Duisekhan got excited. At night he would roam about the dark streets of the village, muttering words only comprehensible to himself, laughing for no reason and frightening the passers-by. If money came his way, he would buy cheap, small sugarplums and give away handfuls to the children. The children treated this huge, lonely man with respect and never teased him; each one of us was always ready to help him.

„Huh! What arrogance! If that down-and-out doesn't want the money, let me have it,“ suggested the retired policeman, Otegen.

„You have no conscience! You're always ready to grab what does not belong to you! Allah is not with you. At least you should be ashamed before God!“ Grandmother Bokey attacked him.

„Your God doesn't hand out money!“ Otegen snapped back but nevertheless fell silent. He knew that there was no love lost between himself and the villagers as in his day he had over-zealously waved a revolver around.

At night when everything had quietened down, I went up to my father.

„Father, I will not go to Ayaguz.“

„Do you want to go to Auapa in Semipalatinsk?“ my father asked me.

„No, I'll go with my grandfather,“ I forced out of myself.

With a strange expression on his face, my father silently looked at me.

„I want to be with my grandfather,“ I repeated.

My father shifted his confused gaze to my mother and I understood that it was easier for him to organize the whole district than to deal with me.

„The Evacuation Organizing Committee will remain behind in the village. There are seven of us and we will stay here... You'll have to go with the little ones to Ayaguz.“ He fell silent and nodded in my direction. „And what are we going to do with him?“

„If you want him to be exposed to radiation, send him with his grandfather,“ mother angrily replied.

„I won't be exposed to radiation, why should I be?“ I objected.

„Don't repeat words you don't understand,“ mother said in a tired voice and muttered, „The bomb won't ask your permission.“ And then added very quietly, „Ruin has befallen us...“

Father, pretending not to have heard her last words, stared at me intently and said, „Alright. You'll go with grandfather and grandmother. They need help anyway and you already are an adult dzhigit.“

„Hurray!“ I shouted. „Hurray!“

Mother mournfully rocked her head from side to side.

„We have been told that it is not dangerous,“ father added.

The villagers loaded up at dawn and hastily bid their farewells. Once again there was that terrifying sound of confusion and commotion – the weeping of women, of children, the roar of vehicles, the bleating of sheep and the barking of soldiers' commands.

My grandfather and I also set off. Behind the village gathered other old men and women, who were going to the mountains with the animals.

I saw that apart from me, there were no children. Just then I noticed the little girl Kenje sitting on the bullock cart together with her grandmother. I was overjoyed. She smiled at me and I waved back.

„When we went to war, there was no such feeling of terror,“ noted one of the old men.

„That was war, and this is the end of the world.“

„Then it means that young stranger was right? The one the police took away? And the leaflets he read out to us spoke the truth?“

That young man, dirty, ragged and thin, told us such terrifying stories that we, the village boys, shook in terror. He maintained that the end of the world was nigh, after which would come the day of the Last Judgement when each person would answer for their sins. Then he handed out the leaflets where (I remember to this day) in bold letter's it stated:

„THE END OF THE WORLD. 17th AUGUST, 1953. 12 MINS PAST 6. EVERYTHING WILL BEGIN IN KAZAKHSTAN.“

And so it appeared that, indeed, the end of the world was due as the tramp had predicted. What becomes of the human soul after death? It was as if an electric current had run through me from top to toe – I so wanted to live. I, a seven-year-old boy, contemplated death for the first time, something which had never occupied any place in my consciousness; for the first time I felt the approach of Death, the Grim Reaper... In a day or two my soul would be before the Judge of all men... The black cloud of death hung over me, over everyone and everything around us.

The loading up was delayed The lieutenant-colonel was becoming annoyed. Mother was kissing father and saying something very quickly. And then we set off. The cars to the unknown city of Ayaguz and to Semipalatinsk, the old men and women to Genghiztau.

I held the reins of the bullock cart. Death had not gone away with those to Ayaguz and Semipalatinsk – it was waiting for us in the depths of the Genghiztau. I was afraid, but I so wanted to be a golden eagle – so that I could boldly look straight into my grand-father-the-lion's eyes! So that my mother, brother and little sister would be proud of me! And Kenje too.

Our bullock cart was in the lead. When I glanced around I saw a file of wagons and the old men driving the herd. Suddenly a car stopped next to our cart and my father and the lieutenant-colonel stepped out.

„The sodiers will choose a place to stop-over for you,“ said the lieutenant-colonel.

„What?! Are you saying they know the hills better than we do?“ said grandfather angrily.

„Well, they know“ best...» said the lieutenant-colonel, obviously displeased with grandfather's words.

«Yes, of course, you're clever and we're stupid. You're the ones sending us to the death and yet you know best,» said grandfather, spitting.

Grandmother gently touched his shoulder.

«Have you gone completely mad in your old age?» she said in an angry whisper. «Perhaps, you don't care what happens to you, but think of your son. You'll talk yourself into being tied-up and then we won't be able to leave...»

«Be quiet, woman!» said grandfather by now totally incensed. «This is our homeland. So let them say what they intend to do with it!»

He was a hot-tempered man but just. At the end of the twenties, when Genghiztau was being strangled by famine, he left for – the town. But even there things weren't easy – only he and one of his children, my father, survived.

The fellow-villagers surrounded us. Now, when I look back after all these years, I think grandfather somehow instinctively sensed what really threatened the lives of these simple people. How else can I explain his outburst – he was an intelligent, calm person, who certainly understood that his words would not change anything. Absolutely nothing. They eyed each other – the tall, stately lieutenant-colonel and the stooped, yet still powerful, gnarled old man, whose strong hand firmly gripped his whip.

«Do you know, you official, what these people have had to go through? No, you have no idea. You do not understand that this land is the land of a great and sacred people! We have lived peacefully roaming these steppes for centuries, without offending anyone. Our summer pastures are here. Our Abai was born here. Later he became an inconvenience to the powers that be and we would be sent to Siberia for mere mention of his name. Then our great poet and philosopher Shakarim, who was befriended by your Tolstoy, was shot, and once again if a Kazakh were to just

hint at his name, before he knew it he would find himself in Siberia. Our best people died in exile... And here you are just arrived from Semipalatinsk – you don't even know that our entire steppe from the village to Semipalatinsk was strewn with human corpses. Hunger-have you any idea what that is? Do you know how many it wiped out? And then came the war. And how many perished – every second of our dzhigits fell in a faraway land. And take a look at what collective farmers eat, what they receive for a day's labour. We don't live, we exist. It's not that many have forgotten the taste of meat, it's, the taste of bread that they don't remember. For each collective farm's sheep that went missing we paid for with our heads. So, tell me, you official, when will our people begin to live? And will they live at all? You know you are sending us to our death. Isn't that so?»

People listened in silence. They averted their eyes. They agreed with the old man but his outspokenness frightened them and some of them moved away, a blank expression on their faces, as if to say, «See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.»

«Where do you think you're going? Stand still and listen to the truth! Have you lost both your reason and your honesty? Although today, it seems, for many honesty is a stone around one's neck. But what use will you be to anyone without honesty, without a conscience? Have you ever thought about that?»

People froze in shame. And this is where my father interfered.

«Alright, Ake-Father, thank you for the lecture. However, we are all adults and an order is an order...»

However, he also avoided looking straight into grandfather's eyes and I was mortified. I understood that at the time he was thinking that he would have to pay for grandfather's monologue. But I wanted grandfather to tell the army officer more about our homeland. I thought that it was unlikely that the army officer knew anything coherent about us. This was probably the first time that he had ever seen any Kazakhs. Perhaps he thinks we are all sheep and he is a bear. I was feeling annoyed but just then the lieutenant-colonel went up to grandfather and embraced him.

«I do understand you, old man. We have all suffered. We have suffered more than any other nation. We lost the father of our people, Stalin, under whom the nation defeated fascism. And now a new danger threatens us. Do you know that the Americans have already dropped an atom bomb over Japan? And now they are threatening us and so we must defend ourselves. We do not want to attack anyone but we must be vigilant at all times. Am I not right? Yes, we are carrying out tests, but all measures have been taken to ensure that the local population is not endangered. This is why we suggested that you leave the village. Therefore, insisting that we are driving you to your death is hardly justified. We have no choice – we want to save the country from an American invasion.»

Grandfather, frowning, did not speak. Then, turning around abruptly, he went towards his bullock cart. My father patted me on the shoulder and tousled my hair.

«Alright then, off you go. Help grandfather and grandmother as we agreed,» he said.

I nodded in agreement and then spontaneously looked up at the sky – what if an American bomb was already flying towards us. But the sky was clear, not a single cloud, a clear peaceful sky...

«What will you eat?» grandmother asked my father. «We have some flour, let's share it.»

«It's not necessary. We have provisions of tinned food,» answered father. «Don't worry about me. It's better that you do all that the army bids you to do...»

«If you really get hungry, then kill the hens. I've left them for you.» Grandfather lashed the horse with his whip, ignoring father's last words, and we set off.

I MISS MY FATHER. My wife and I were walking around the shops attempting to buy something «typical of Moscow» to take to Semipalatinsk. There were queues everywhere for everything, people were snatching pieces of sausage wrapped in polythene, from each other, jostling each other for meat and cheese. Good quality candy, which my father used to like very

much, had disappeared. I can't find anything for my mother. I'll just have to accept the fact that this evening, for the first time, I will fly to my homeland, to my father's grave, with empty hands.

My wife and I walked silently down the Arbat. It was crowded. There were street artists, photographers, singers, poets and lively discussions. Young people like everywhere in the world were enjoying themselves, loving, hating and arguing.

The underpass leading to the Metro was filled with painters. I pushed my way through the crowd out of curiosity, and – was dumbfounded. A painting depicted the Genghiz Hills. I would have recognized those long bends and ravines anywhere. I touched my wife's elbow.

«Look, can you see Genghiztau? Can you see how the fiery clouds tear the picture apart and how the evil dirty-grey mushroom hangs suspended in the sky?»

At the foot of the hills, incensed horses, their teeth bared, snorted wildly. The whole scene was being observed by a little girl dressed in white, with enormous demented eyes. «It can't be,» I thought. «This is no mere coincidence. This has been painted by someone who has seen everything with his own eyes...»

But this painting hung above a bearded, young man who swiftly and confidently was painting the portrait of a young woman who sat before him, rigid with tension.

«Where does this painting come from? Is it yours?» I asked.

«Why, do you like it?» the painter answered the question with another.

«It's not a question of liking it or not liking it. It's terrifying,» I said, not being able to tear myself away from the painting.

«Terrifying for some and not for others,» the young man said indifferently, smirking and handing the finished portrait to the young woman, «I'll draw you, if you like,» he offered. «If you're in a hurry I can draw you in pencil, but if you have time I can paint you and you'll have a solid portrait. They like solid portraits in Central Asia.»

«How do you know what they like in Central Asia?» slipped out from my lips.

«I know, I'm no fool,» barked the painter.

It was obvious that there was something in my face that made him look away and change his tone of voice.

«The person who painted this picture was much smarter than I. He understood Central Asia with his soul.»

«It's Kazakhstan,» I said. «The hydrogen bomb test.»

«You've guessed it. Kazakhstan. Some hills, the name of which I can't remember. The painting is by my father,» confessed the painter after a brief silence.

«They're the Genghiz Hills,» I said. «Is your father alive?»

«He died at the end of the sixties. Cancer of the gullet. My mother said that it was in these very hills that he contracted his illness. He only began to paint just before his death.»

«Is the painting for sale?» I asked.

«Everything is for sale,» he grinned. «If only there was money...»

His cynical, philosophical reply took away my inclination to ask him any further questions. It was clear enough that the self-styled painter had either been an eyewitness or a participant in those evil events. I paid for the painting. I paid the fellow handsomely. The painting now hangs above my desk...

In the plane I began to read Hiroshima by Makoto Odo. I had first heard about this novel from my father. Over several days I had scoured the library for this book to take with me on my trip.

It took several days to make our way into the depths of the Genghiz Hills. As we walked, we drove the cattle forward and holding the horses by the reins, urged them on.

The high mountain passes, the valleys, the green pastures, trees, rivers, springs – I, who had come for the first time to the summer pastures, was struck by their glorious, pure beauty, enticed

by their mystery. Is man capable of destroying such divine beauty with his own hands? Sheer insanity...

It was late autumn. Once after dark, we stopped over for the night. We lit a camp-fire and began hastily to prepare some soup. The old men went to tether the horses. The old women and I dragged some dry branches and twigs for the fire from the forest. The overhanging, dark, gloomy rocks seemed like malicious devils from a tale. Fear emanated from the rocks – a terrible fear. It was as if the fear hung in the very night air.

White-faced, with huge camel-like eyes, the little girl, Kenje, wrapped in a camel-hair blanket, sat by my grandmother's side. Her grandmother, who was gathering brushwood with everyone else, had not yet returned from the forest. Kenje was trembling either from the cold or fear. I threw an armful of wood onto the fire. It flared up and I saw Kenje's frightened eyes.

«But where is my grandmother?» she asked.

«She'll be here in a minute. She was right behind us. What's the matter? Are you afraid? Chicken,» I began to tease her gently. She remained silent and I felt ashamed that I was making fun of the youngster. «Are you hungry? Do you want some dry cottage cheese?» I asked her and she nodded, «Thank you.» «I'm here, I'm with you, don't be afraid!» I started to say, offering her the cheese. I had spoken loudly, louder than was necessary in the situation. She sighed.

Kenje was a sickly, anaemic little girl. Those eyes of hers always looked at you with trust and devotion; they were the eyes of true innocence, of an angel. Her mother had died giving birth and no one had either seen or known her father. She was brought up by her grandmother and grandfather who were quiet and modest folk. Their three sons had been swallowed up in the war and their daughter had died, but nevertheless they carried themselves with dignity and tried not to show their grief, nor to lose heart. My grandfather used to say that it was sheer honour which kept them alive. If you took away their honour, they would die immediately. They would not be able to continue to live like others, as if nothing had happened. «They are that sort of breed of people,» grandfather used to say. Breed... Grandfather used to love this word but would never use it in vain.

The fire crackled happily. Pitch blackness enveloped us and intensified the feeling that we were surrounded by the cold loneliness of the world. Only the twinkling of the stars in the sky sowed a faint, undefined hope in our hearts. Grandmother mumbled something, lifting the lid of the cauldron to stir the broth with a big wooden spoon.

«Do you want to live, Rollan?» Kenje asked suddenly.

Puzzled, I looked at her, not comprehending the meaning of these words. Patches of light danced on her pale face, her long lashes were half-lowered and tears flowed from her eyes. «Don't cry,» I said. «I know that's inviting misfortune, but I can't help myself,» she quietly sobbed. «Tomorrow they're going to explode a bomb! I'm scared!» She could not stop shivering and I wrapped her in a fur coat over the blanket. «Do you think dying is terrifying?» she asked and then replied herself, «Death comes in all forms – difficult and easy... A terrible death awaits me...» «What are you saying? You'll never die, Kenje,» I objected. «You're a good person, a very good person,» she touched my hand with her timid fingers. To me she was like a thin Teed which swayed in the merciless wind. Gloom. Darkness. Was it possible that Kenje and I would never be able to escape this dark gloom and that Death stood guard over us, greedily waiting to embrace us? Death... The word flashed like lightning and I shuddered. «Did the wing of death also touch you?» asked Kenje, but I remained silent. I was shivering. Suddenly I began to pray and for the first time I began to repeat the words I had heard grandmother say: «Oh, Great Merciful Allah! Save and protect your son. Don't let me disappear.» I thought for a minute and then added, «Don't let anyone disappear, then I'll believe that you exist! Then I will always pray to you, forty times a day.» Again, I pondered and corrected myself. «Five times a day, oh Merciful Allah. I have faith in you!..»

I had not noticed that Kenje had fallen asleep. I put a saddle under her head and joined the old men who had settled themselves at some distance at another camp-fire and their voices only

reached me in snatches while I had been talking to Kenje. I approached their fire, added several dry branches to it and sat down next to my grandfather. The old men were carried away by their discussion and did not take any notice of me. «Somewhere here, in a well, lies the unburied body of Shakarim,» said Arkham and everyone fell silent.

I knew a great number of poems by Shakarim by heart, but my grandfather had forbidden me to recite them. «Learn them, but be silent until it is time,» he instructed me. «When they rehabilitate him, then you will speak. The time will come...»

At that time it did not occur to me that even at the mention of Abai and Shakarim, people were sent to Siberia, to the land where, according to a Kazakh turn of phrase, «they ride on dogs». Just for mentioning their names...

«Our Otegen knows where that well is located. But he will remain silent, after all he is a man of the government,» said Duisekhan.

«As Allah is my witness, how could I know this?» swore Otegen. «I don't know anything.»

«Perhaps it is true that he doesn't know anything,» voiced doubt the other old men.

«Indeed, perhaps you, too, don't know anything. Perhaps you've forgotten how he served in the local NKVD and would not part with his 'cannon'!» said Duisekhan angrily, once again turning to Otegen. «And at that time, I suppose you thought – murder the old man, and that's the end of it? Oh no, the spirit of the great poet is haunting to this day these ravines at night like the shadow of a snow leopard...»

Otegen, offended, got up, tightened his lips and disappeared into the darkness. The old men broke into smiles. And to this day I fail to understand why they were not afraid to hold such discussions. Or... or did they live in the hope that their old age would serve as an excuse?

Or did the half-witted Duisekhan suspect that incriminating him was pointless; and to those around him he was like a living corpse anyway. To this day, I do not know whether he was ashamed of this or deep down people's defects amused him. He himself was invulnerable, free and clean before Allah, and evidently understood it. He openly said what he thought. Of course, Otegen, who avoided Duisekhan as much as possible, had to endure more than anyone. Everyone knew that the death of Duisekhan's older brother in a far-off Siberian prison was at the hands of Otegen. In the twenties, his other brother, together with a group of dare-devils, escaped to China...

I lay my head on my grandfather's lap and fell asleep. A threatening ghost of a terrifying snow leopard appeared to me in my dreams. The ghost hung threateningly over me, coming closer and closer. «Don't be afraid, don't be afraid of me,» suddenly whispered the ghost in a human voice. «It will be difficult for you, little one, but you will endure. Remember, remember everything, my son! Remember, remember, remember! For a time will come which will compel you to reveal the truth to the world, the bitter truth of what you saw...»

Greenish sparks poured from his eyes. The snow leopard patted me on the shoulder with his front paw. In an instant he was gone.

But when I awoke, shivering from the coolness of the morning, and began to rub my shoulders with my palms, I suddenly noticed that on my left arm there were fresh long scratches. «The snow leopard! They are his claw marks!» flashed across my mind. «But how is it possible? It wasn't a day-dream. I was asleep and just woke up. How, how is it possible?»

With the sunrise, soldiers appeared in the hills. «Where did they come from?» said my grandfather in amazement.

«Indeed, it's as if they have come out from under the earth,» the old man Arkham said fearfully.

The soldiers approached us and one of them, obviously the oldest, said: «Everything will begin in half an hour. During the explosion you should cover yourselves with your felt mats and don't get up until told to do so. Put out the fires immediately.»

The soldiers were already pouring water over the flames. Their short sharp commands exploded in the mellow morning calm. People began to take out the felt mats, gather in small groups, making themselves as comfortable as possible. Kenje lay between grandmother and myself. Her gentle face grew haggard and her wide eyes once again filled with fear, her long lashes scarcely moved. My grandfather whispered a prayer. Grandmother covered me from head to foot by force. I broke free. She became cross.

The soldiers rushed about to and fro. I could hear their cracked, hoarse voices. Suddenly, their commander shouted loudly:

«Attention! Attention! Everyone down! Lie still!»

And – the earth rocked gently. It seemed like an eternal cradle, lulling us to sleep. But, all of a sudden, it shuddered and from below the ground something lashed out at us with violent tremors that struck our legs, chest, face; grandmother's embrace slackened, the earth reared up like on horse; the earth, the hills in their final convulsions resisted extinction. As I stuck my head out from under the felt mat, I saw an enormous mushroom cloud filling the sky and fire-spitting flashes danced in an unimaginable turbulent blaze of kaleidoscopic colour. In an instant, my very being was paralysed by fear and wonder. I had not seen anything like it even in my worst nightmares. The mountains groaned, huge stones crashed down arid trees bowed and creaked, and suddenly amidst the hellish tumult of sounds, a desperate, ear-splitting cry emerged – or was it a scream? To this day I do not know how to describe that awful sound. A little girl, in a white dress, evading the hail of boulders, was running for her life. I had not realized that I had got out from under the felt mat and was standing, benumbed, following her with my eyes. As the fiery mushroom cloud struggled upwards we were blinded by bright flashes, and the little girl continued to run toward some unknown destination, along the reeling earth. I was frozen as if rooted to the ground, not knowing what I should do. Her scream was ear-splitting. Or perhaps there was no scream? Perhaps I had imagined it? Perhaps her gaping mouth was silent and she was running into the mountains arid not the steppe, and the stones were flying past her. «She'll be killed. I have to save her, I have to run after her. I have to catch up with her,» I thought and shouted, «Kenje! Kenje!» I rushed after her but suddenly it dawned on me that she had certainly gone mad! Shocked by this sudden revelation, I tripped and fell. At that very moment a large stone flew past me and I realized that Allah had saved me. Kenje had gone mad, she had gone mad... I caught up with her. Her thin shoulders were quivering, she was running and crying, and then I could clearly hear her heart-rending cry – «Aaaah!» Suddenly, once again everything was illuminated by flashes of light. I reached Kenje's side and we both fell to the ground. I could hear the stamp of heavy boots behind us, but before I could turn around, we were covered with a heavy felt mat. I heard a gruff voice say, «Be still! Don't get up!» Kenje lightly squeezed my hand. «Don't be afraid,» I whispered to her, but she did not answer. The touch of her moist fingers, could one ever forget that?...

Once again the earth shook, this time stronger – it throbbed as in an epileptic fit and my heart throbbed in fits and starts, as if my spirit was fading away. I forgot about Kenje, I forgot about everything on earth. I realized that the WORLD HAD COLLAPSED and I too would be killed in its devastation. I thought only of myself. Death stood over me with her axe – swish, swish, swish. I could see the blade being lowered onto my childish neck; I lost consciousness, sensing in a fleeting moment that Kenje's hand had grown cold. «She's dead,» I thought as I gradually came round from my dull stupor. Under the felt mat, in total darkness, I lay trembling slightly and bathed in sweat, next to the dead Kenje. In my boyish heart, I suddenly realized that I had been in love with 'this little, sickly girl. I stirred, trying to get nearer to Kenje's face, to kiss her for the first and last time. «Don't move! Lie still!» I heard the same thunderous voice say. I nevertheless, somehow managed to edge my way closer to her and kissed her on the forehead. Again he shouted at me, but the voice was muffled and I realized that its owner also spoke from under a felt mat.

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