Dear Reader,

I am the author of two autobiographical books written in Russian. The first, "All begins with childhood," was published in paper version in 2003.

Only the electronic version of my second book, "The Long Road," exists so far. Its last section entitled "Ester" has been translated into English and is now in front of you.

You may send your opinions to ValYuabov@yahoo.com

Valery Yuabov

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.

‘ESTER’

Written by Valery Yuabov
Translated by Regina Kozakova

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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 sniffling. 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 any more. 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 particular 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 then 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 tuned 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 *arik* 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* –white salty balls made of kumis, or eat a fresh warm crumpet with homemade cheese. Local Uzbek women were selling that food. Clad in brightly streaked traditional silk dresses, fur vests, kerchiefs, and thin leather boots, they all had weather-bitten brown cheeks that revealed them to be mountain dwellers. But just like women anywhere in the world, they were chattering with such enthusiasm that they didn't seem too concerned about selling their goods. And they also didn't seem to care much about what their kids were doing, so the kids played, clustering together and happily poking at the ground.

We ate and rested in the shade. The sky was like a huge blue tea bowl inverted over us. The air was crystal clear. Everything we saw –sky, trees, river, mountain slopes – was very distinct, down to the last small detail. Goats were grazing on the closest mountain, very near the top. "Mountain goats. Only they can go that high," our driver explained.

The mountain was so steep that its slope was almost vertical… Horses were neighing close to the river in that small peaceful valley. The river was wider there, shallow, quiet and transparent. Pebbles on its bottom sparkled in the sun's rays. Mama looked at the water, squinting.

It was time to continue our journey. The mountains whirled around us, retreated, disappeared from view, as we descended ever lower, and the Fergana Valley opened up before us. It seemed especially bright and hospitable after the beautiful yet wild and severe mountain landscapes. It was impossible to tear our eyes away from the generous beauty of the plenty created by human hands. Orchards floated along our path. The tree branches were heavy with fruits, like precious stones – rosy peaches and apples… Grapevines twined around small columns… Melon fields filled the air with the delicate aroma of honeydew. It seemed possible to reach out and touch the melons and the huge striped water melons through the car window… Sunflowers bent their heavy gold-crowned heads. Corn stood like a dark-green solid mass. Emerald cotton fields crisscrossed by canals and roads stretched to the horizon. Villages could be seen – their roofs flashing among slender trees that appeared to reach for the sky.

"I've heard," Yakov enlightened me along the way, "that this rich agricultural country was called Davan in ancient times. Now, as you know, the Fergana Valley is divided among three countries – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Uzbeks own more than half of the valley. And people naturally flock here in great numbers. It's quite densely populated. Almost a third of the population of Uzbekistan lives here. And they live nicely, right? They're lucky."

“Lucky they are, but they've toiled really hard for this luck,” I thought, clinging to the car window.

Canals shone like long stripes in the distance. Webs of *ariks* branched off of them. And all along the canals, one could make out the small figures of people with hoes, opening spigots and crosspieces to allow the water to run into their *ariks*.

"There are hundreds of canals here," my guide explained. "The water comes from the mountains through the Naryn River and Kara Darya. They flow from the very top of the Tian Shan, from the glaciers, and they converge here in the valley to become the Syr Darya." Yakov pointed somewhere off to the east where most likely that miracle occurred – the birth of the largest river in Asia. "So there must be enough water for gardening and crops, but I’ve heard that there's not enough drinking water. They have a lot of problems filtering it. *Ariks*, as you can see, are ancient. They’re the old Asian irrigation and drinking water systems."

Then Yakov finished his story with some unexpected information – we were getting near a dangerous area where the local Tajiks and Meskhet-Turks had been engaged in a bloody feud, though Yakov wasn't worried. "It’s happening farther on, in Tajikistan," he assured us, waving his hand in that direction to demonstrate how distant it was. "It’s quiet on the Uzbek side of the valley."

I told him about the bloody atrocities, unbridled abuse of power, killings not only of children and old people but of fetuses ripped from the wombs of pregnant women that I had heard about on the news. I wanted to understand what was going on there.

"Ethnic discord, Valera," Yakov shrugged. "Fighting over power and land, as usual," he finished sadly.

Meanwhile we were approaching Namangan. There were more people on the road. The atmosphere was more animated, and urban dwellings began appearing on the roadside, the same prefab four-story buildings as in Tashkent, the same shopping centers, so the city didn’t seem distinctive to me, although I wasn’t examining it closely.

Surkhandarya Street was unpaved and dusty. The gate. The courtyard. The garden. The one-story house. We knocked at the gate for a long time. We had covered miles and miles to get here, but perhaps we were not expected, perhaps no one was at home. Then we heard steps – and the door was opened. It was a dark-complexioned middle-aged man, and he was very calm.

"Come right in. I am Mukhitdin Inamovich."

This was an Uzbek home, a real Uzbek home where life continued the habitual way from generation to generation, where footwear was to be left at the front door. It had a cozy living room with a carved ceiling and plinths, and rugs on the floor. On top of the rugs were blankets, on which we sat down, crossing our legs before a *distarkhan*, a kind of low table, laden with sweets and fruits. We were tired, tense, tortured by the waiting. The only thing we were eager to do was to talk to the healer as soon as possible. But it is easier to move a rock than to break a custom. No one would talk about business with travelers before feeding them. After exchanging greetings, we talked unhurriedly about our families, children, and work. We drank fragrant tea with sweets – that’s how an Asian meal always began. Then the host served soup – *shourpa* in large bowls, *kogas*, a very tasty *shourpa*. In other words, everything took its normal course,

and perhaps it was for the best. The exhaustion of the road receded, and tension was eased. There was wisdom in ancient customs.

It was only after the meal that the healer turned to Mother and said, "Let me examine you."

The examination, which happened right in front of us, seemed quite strange to me. The healer didn't ask Mother to undress. He didn't take out a stethoscope. He took Mother's right hand, put his fingers on her wrist and began to feel her pulse... I froze, trying not to breathe. Suddenly he asked, "When did you have an inflammation of the right fallopian tube?"

"Inflamm...," Mother thought for a moment. "I had one about 30 years ago after a miscarriage."

Then the healer was feeling her pulse again. "Something's wrong with your left breast. When did you have surgery?"

Mama looked at me in surprise. "Does this mean that you've already told the healer everything? When did you get the chance?" I understand from her glance.

"The surgery was about two months ago," she answered.

I remained silent. I was lost, awestruck. I didn't know how to express it. The thing was that I hadn't had an opportunity to tell the healer anything, neither on the phone nor today. I hadn't had the chance. I hadn't talked to him about Mama's disease – that was it. And suddenly now… I looked around, for the first time, with a strange feeling. Where were we? At the doctor's for a long-awaited visit? But those words were so closely connected in my mind with a hospital environment, a well-equipped office, white robes, at least. Here there was none of that. Perhaps after this he would take Mother to his hospital, I thought.

He hadn't done a blood test… no x-ray… This strange healer sat calmly near my mother, his fingers moving lightly around her wrist. He could hear some melody. Beethoven – the name flashed across my mind. Why Beethoven? He was deaf… And this man was not, he wasn't deaf. We were deaf, the deaf spectators.

"When did your tailbone begin to ache?"

That, I knew myself. Five years ago, Mama slipped and fell on the stairs. She was in pain. Injections had to be administered. The amazing thing was not only that he knew about it but the way he asked the questions. He didn't ask, "Does you tailbone ache?" He asked, "When did it begin to ache?"

"When did you begin having the pain in your lower leg?"

Her right leg had begun to ache after Mama tore a ligament. And in that way – question after question, without any tests, equipment, or x-rays, in that room with the rugs that reminded me of the Tashkent of my childhood, he told us about all Mother's ordeals, exactly, down to the last detail. It was like magic, but I stopped myself. "Calm down. He's not a sorcerer. He's a scholar, a doctor, but you've never met such a doctor before."

At last he took his fingers off Mother's hand and looked at me. His face and gaze were very calm, but when our eyes met, there was something special in that gaze. It was somewhat penetrating, but I didn't know if I felt that because I was nervous. He looked at me and talked, bending his fingers like a child counting. "First of all we need to cure her liver, uterus, fallopian tubes… heart… cortex..."

At that moment someone called him. I rushed out of the room after him. I was afraid he would reveal something in front of Mama. Liver, uterus, heart… And what about the most important thing? Why was he silent about that?

"Doctor," I mumbled, "Muhkitdin Inamovich. How about it? Will you be able..? Is there any hope of curing her?"

"We'll see, my dear man. You see, it's already in the liver."

Mukhitdin Inamovich expressed his thoughts in a very simple way. Was it because he had talked to her not in his native language or because he was a simple person by nature and didn't like to overuse scientific terms the way many doctors did?

"It's already in the liver," echoed in my mind over and over. Blinking to remove the fog from my eyes, I asked, "What will happen? What?"

"We'll see, my dear man," he repeated. "In your mother's uterus, I saw two scars left from scraping. That's where it spread from. We need to try hard to stop the process. If we succeed, there is a chance, but she will need to be treated for a minimum of three to four years.

I began to nod as if in understanding, though I didn't comprehend anything then. However, the words "three to four years" made me almost happy. They allowed me to breathe, they meant postponement, they gave hope!

Mukhitdin Inamovich patted me on the shoulder. "Let's go. Mama is sitting there alone."

It was amazing. I had known this person for only a few hours, but I had the feeling that he was an intimate acquaintance whom I had always known. I felt complete trust. I was relieved. No more of that horrible burden that seemed to press not only my soul but my whole body into the ground. Why had this happened? Because of his unpretentiousness? Because he had managed to determine this just by feeling her pulse? But that didn't explain anything. Probably, some amazing qualities of his soul had made him a true healer.

It seemed that Mama felt it as well. She greeted us with a smile. "You've told me everything about myself. Now, please, look at Valera," she requested.

He nodded, "Sit down."

I sat down, fighting off my fear. He barely touched my wrist as he said, "When you were a child, you had a bad case of food poisoning. Do you remember?"

Just think. The doctor was wrong. I was upset. "I didn't...," I began to say, but Mama interrupted me.

"You did. You had food poisoning. We all had food poisoning from meat… We spent three weeks in the hospital. He was almost ten, so he doesn't remember," she explained to the doctor.

He nodded. "That's why when you run for a long time or lift something heavy, you have pain here… under your left ribs."

I looked up at him but couldn't say anything. The most expensive doctors on Park Avenue had examined me, did all the tests, but they couldn't find anything. Nothing! They couldn't explain what caused the pain.

The doctor held my hand, nodding slightly. You have four colics located there, in your intestines," he muttered, obviously explaining what had happened to my intestines after the poisoning. What "colics" were, I could only guess. They must have been some kind of obstructions. But that wasn't important. If he knew I had pain, he couldn't be wrong about the diagnosis.

Then the doctor found what I myself knew about – I had an allergy and a pinched sciatic nerve. That was all, thank God. I sighed with relief.

Perhaps in order to calm Mama down, after understanding that we liked him, (With his permission, I was videotaping the way he worked.) Mukhitdin Inamovich decided to show us a video about some of his patients.

In the first frame we could see a woman with a child in her arms. "From Turkey," the doctor explained. "The five-year-old child couldn't walk from the time he was born. He had cerebral palsy."

In the next frames, the doctor massaged the child. One frame, another, then a third. One angle, then another. But in all of them, there was the motionless little body and the doctor bent over it. But suddenly, something was different. What was it? Yes, the child moved his hand. More frames. Massage, massage, massage… But now we were watching very closely, very attentively… Up… his leg moved… Yes, he moved it, the knee was bent… Another frame – the child was sitting! Now we were excited, waiting as if for a miracle... And it happened. There he was crawling, getting to his feet, and there was the happy mother in tears (Who wouldn't cry under the circumstances?), watching her child playing, romping. That day, we saw a few more amazing tapes. Not all of them could demonstrate graphically, like the one with the massaging, how the doctor worked, but they showed desperate, exhausted, seriously ill people at the beginning, and the same people, happy, serene, physically reborn at the end.

Chapter 10. **Is It Easy to Become a Tabib?**

Our visit was, in fact, over. All we had to do was get the medication the doctor had sent someone to pick up at the pharmacy – his own pharmacy, naturally. And while we were waiting for the medication, we heard quite a few amazing things about our new acquaintance… or, as I now felt, our new friend.

It all began with the conversation about medications. I asked a question which was, as I now realize, ignorant. What medication did he prescribe for people who had a disease like my mama's? He raised his eyebrows and answered my question with a question. Did I really think that for one disease, even if the symptoms were the same, it was possible to use one and the same medication every time? For instance, a headache. There were a dozen reasons for it. And a headache would be different in each particular case – it could be in the temples, the forehead, etc. Of course, it was possible to deaden the pain with a painkiller, for some time. But whatever had caused the headache would still be there. It might have been caused by irregularities in different organs. Perhaps, that headache was a warning of a more serious problem.

The doctor was transported by the conversation. He was really carried away. He rocked slightly as he spoke. His gestures were expressive, but his face remained calm.

"My dear man, Eastern medicine distinguishes 28 types of cancer – and each of them happens for so many different reasons. So why is it correct to use the same treatment for all of them? But this is exactly what's being done. All oncological patients are put through chemotherapy and radiation. Is it possible to get to the source of a disease this way? That's why they fail to cure it. If you smash a snake's head, it will die, but if you squeeze its tail, you won't be able to defeat it," he ended his speech with an Asian proverb.

It then become quite clear to me that it was absolutely pointless to ask him what kind of medication he was preparing for Mama. Obviously, it was the one that was good only for her particular case. But I couldn't resist asking a different question, "Mukhitdin Inamovich, where have you learned all of this? I mean… there are no such schools."

He laughed. It turned out that everything began after a serious problem. A very young Mukhitdin, a student in the Irrigation department who had just finished his first year, worked on a student construction team in the summer of 1967. The students lived in kibitkas (nomads' tents). Every morning, they were taken in trucks down a winding bumpy road to their places of work. One day, one of the trucks was going at high speed and tipped over into a roadside ditch.

"We all flew out of the truck," Mukhitdin Inamovich told me. "On top of that, I was hit by the edge of the side. I could have been sliced in two, but there happened to be a small hole where I had fallen. That saved me. Of course, I was unconscious for a long time. They did an x-ray at the hospital. It showed that my spine was broken in three places and there was a crack in my pelvis. But I was grateful to Fate. One of my comrades had such a head trauma that he died a year later.

The doctors at the Andijan hospital had little hope of saving Mukhitdin. The most they hoped for was that he would survive after a complex and difficult surgery, but he would never walk.

Mukhitdin remained unconscious for many days. That's why surgery was postponed. When he regained consciousness, his father, Umar-ugli Inam, asked the hospital to discharge his son and took him home.

Umar-ugli Inam was a wise person. I would like to write about him at least briefly.

He was an agronomist, but he also studied other natural sciences and had a perfect knowledge of history. His home was filled with bookshelves. Among his hundreds of books were many Arabic ones – works by scholars, philosophers and theologians. The Soviet state deprived Umar-ugli Inam of all his Arabic books. One day, Red Army guards in pointed hats with big red stars arrived in the village. They searched homes, took away the Arabic books and burned them right there. From that time on, Umar-ugli Inam, a true believer and a very kindhearted person, had no good feelings toward the Soviet state.

Mukhitdin's father was a very strong man. He was 60-years old, yet he could carry a sack of flour in each hand from the market, each sack weighing 60 pounds.

Umar-ugli didn't trust the doctors at the Andijan hospital. What could doctors who considered his son's case hopeless possibly do? That wise man was familiar with the Asian medicine pioneered by Avicenna. He took his son out of the hospital because he had learned that a wonderful Asian healer lived not far away in Jalalabad. He was Tabib Abdukhakim Bobo, an old Uigur from Xinjiang, exiled from China. He needed to take the motionless, half-dead Mukhitdin there, so he put him in the back seat of his Volga.

"Do you remember how you got there?"

"Yes," Mukhitdin Inamovich nodded. "I remember how an old man with a long gray beard ordered me to be carried into the house where they laid me on my stomach on a board. He examined me for a long time. He listened to my pulse, and then he got busy with my legs. He pricked my knees, calves, and thighs with needles. He asked me whether I could feel anything, but I couldn't feel a thing. After he finished the examination, the tabib brought herbal brews. He asked me to smell one of them and to drink another. I fell asleep and didn't wake up for two days."

Later his father told him what had happened while he had been fast asleep. What happened could be called a miracle – the old tabib manipulated his vertebrae with his fingers. He connected the broken parts of Mukhitdin's spine in a way that allowed them to knit together correctly.

When Mukhitdin came to his senses, he was lying on his back. He felt no pain, but it seemed to him that he had no body below the waist. He could feel neither his thighs nor his legs.

"Days passed, but I still couldn't feel my legs. Then suddenly, it happened on the eighteenth day. Pain flared up like fire, and along with it, I felt my legs. They were covered with perspiration as if water had been poured over them, and then they began to jerk violently. My father, who had stayed by my side the whole time, called the tabib. The old healer was very satisfied and laughingly told my father, 'Your son will not only live, but he'll be able to walk.' As you see, Valera, the tabib told the truth," and Mukhitdin Inamovich grinned. "He gave me my legs back."

In response, I could only shake my head. It was impossible to imagine that doctors had considered this strong solidly built man with straight back and springy gait to be hopelessly incurable and forever condemned to a wheelchair. A real miracle had occurred!

"When did you begin to walk?" I asked.

"About two months later. I lay on a board for the first month and in a bed for the second. The tabib gave me a drug – pills composed of 68 herbs. They were called *hap-dora*. I still had pain in my legs and spine, but I also felt more and more sensation. I began to feel what was going on in my bowels, my rectum, my bladder. The day arrived – I think it was the fifty-fifth day – when the tabib and my father lifted me, and then suspended by them in midair, I took four steps. Then I walked with two crutches, and in a month with just one. One day I heard, 'Now try to walk by yourself.' And I walked, walked on my own, swaying, touching the walls, but I walked.

"That must have been a happy day," I mumbled.

"It certainly was!" Mukhitdin Inamovich nodded. "It was good that on that day I didn't know how many hard and heavy things lay ahead, hard and heavy, literally heavy. The tabib began to make me carry heavy things. Two small sacks of sand – one on my back, another on my chest were hung over my shoulder on a rope, plus a sack of sand in each hand. I don't remember how much they weighed at the beginning, but eventually it was up to 60 pounds in each hand. Just imagine walking like that! But I walked. I was happy. And I pondered something as I walked.

"In half a year I was able to walk quite easily. Then one day, the tabib said, 'It's time for us to part.' That was when I dared to say, 'I don't want to part. I would like to ask you, Tabib, if you would kindly allow me to be your pupil.' The tabib didn't agree right away. First, he tested my memory, then the sensitivity of my fingers. That was very important for a pulsologist. And, at last, I heard, 'I'll agree to teach you under one condition – you won't drop out of the Institute. You'll need to have lessons on the weekends, and I'll give you homework for the rest of the week.'

"What could I do?" Mukhitdin Inamovich sighed. "I couldn't argue with my teacher. I had to agree. To tell you the truth, I didn't know why Tabib Abdulkhakim Bobo had made that decision. My studies at the Institute plus weekly trips to Jalalabad, plus homework every day were a heavy load for this pupil, particularly after such a terrible trauma. But, perhaps he considered such a load useful for developing industriousness and a sense of responsibility."

Mukhitdin Inamovich endured that load courageously and with honor. After graduating from the Institute – with honors, by the way – he began working as an engineer in his field. And he moved in with his teacher. The learning took 15 years.

"Was it difficult? Did you get tired?" I asked.

"Of course, I did. But learning from such a great teacher was a real joy. He taught me the old Tibetan-Asian medicine, pulse diagnostics, and how to cure with herbs. Apart from medicine, he was perfectly knowledgeable in biology and astronomy. But the tabib's wisdom came not only from his knowledge. I constantly felt the influence of his kindness, fairness and nobility. Let me tell you what happened when I went to the Andijan hospital to see the doctor who had decided to operate on me. I greeted him, and right away he asked, 'How is your brother? Is he still alive?' 'Why my brother?' I said. 'It was me in this hospital. I was in trouble.' The doctor laughed, 'Are you kidding? That can't be true. That guy was a hopeless case.' 'What do you mean hopeless? I've been cured.' 'Who cured you?' 'An old doctor.' Then I began to demonstrate that I was well. I squatted, lifted a chair with one hand…

"The doctor only waved his hand, 'Don't try to fool me. I still don't believe that you're that same paralyzed guy!' I got angry and left. I complained to the tabib. 'Oh, I said to myself, I want to spite that stupid doctor!' The tabib answered me, 'Why are you hurt? Think a little about the chain of events. If that doctor hadn't told your father that your case was hopeless, but they would operate on you anyway, your father wouldn't have brought you to me. That means you should be grateful to that doctor. And please, do it before you see me next time.' The tabib was generally convinced that one should look for good in every single person and be kind to them. He used to say, 'Even if your enemy approaches you with a gun, tell him that first of all you want to feel his pulse, and then he may shoot.' That was the kind of person my fate took me to."

"What did he look like?" I asked. I wanted to know how the tabib looked.

"It's a pity I don't have his photograph. He instilled respect in you at first sight. He had gray hair, a long gray beard, and such clear, wise eyes, so penetrating that they seemed to be looking straight into your soul. He had a straight back; he never stooped. The tabib was 81 when we met. He left this world when he was 94."

We sat there silently. I understood that it was hard for Mukhitdin Inamovich to remember it, so I didn't ask him any more questions about the death of the tabib.

"I went through some difficult times after my teacher passed away. I had no right to practice. I had a degree in engineering, not medicine. Besides, Eastern medicine wasn't recognized as a science in the Soviet Union at that time. Abdulkhakim Bobo had been allowed to have a private practice because he treated local officials. But I didn't have such luck."

And then, His Highness Good Luck came to the rescue. Mukhitdin Inamovich learned of a talented physicist, Abram Samuilovich Magarshak who was the head of the Scientific Research Laboratory of Distance Diagnostics. That lab was a part of the Institute of General Physics of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Fortunately, a branch of the lab was set up at the Teachers Training Institute in Namangan. Umarov went to meet Magarshak. To begin with, he offered to tell him what his ailments were after feeling his pulse. After getting the exact list of his diseases, the perplexed physicist told the healer "We'll work together." He had naturally heard of pulse diagnostics before, but now he knew for sure that it was possible to obtain enormous biomedical information, that a pulse on the oscillating wall of an artery gives a full account about the functioning of the heart, liver and all other internal organs. Moreover, a pulse can obviously give information about the presence of a foreign body.

"Can you 'hear' the first cancer cell in a body?" the physicist asked Umarov once.

The latter answered, "I can not only hear it. I can reject it."

Magarshak and his colleagues decided to create a pulse-diagnostics device with Umarov's help. Mukhitdin Inamovich became a research associate at the lab, and soon after that, the head of the medical diagnostics sector. That's how a doctor-tabib came to be included in the circle of prominent scientists. And, finally, he met the famous physicist Prokhorov who, thanks to his authority as a scientist, supported Eastern medicine, namely the branch of it developed by Umarov.

At last, a wide range of opportunities opened up for Umarov. In 1985, the Minister of Public Health allowed him to treat patients in Moscow hospitals. He was given the right to do his favorite work, not only in his native Uzbekistan but all over the Soviet Union. He had dozens of pupils. The Centers of Eastern Medicine were set up in Moscow, Namangan, Vladivostok and Khabarovsk with his participation.

As I was listening to his amazing story, I thought how many difficulties this composed, seemingly unhurried man had overcome. And he achieved what may seem to be impossible to achieve. Yes, he repaid his teacher very well. He carried on his cause with dignity.

And the doctor, after he finished his laconic story, sat in front of me smoking his cigarette. It seemed he was somewhere far away, perhaps in Moscow where he, who must hardly have spoken any Russia at that time, had found such wonderful friends.

He lit another cigarette, I didn't know which one, and I couldn't restrain myself from asking, "How come, you, a doctor, don't take care of yourself?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's not that harmful. It's even useful. It eases stress. I haven't established through my practice that smoking changes the structure of a cell."

"Oh, God," I thought, "It's hard to imagine everything he has established in his practice." And then I blurted out, "Maybe you also deal with AIDS?"

The doctor nodded calmly, "Little by little. I don't have enough practice. AIDS patients are kept isolated. But I've managed to treat two patients, a man and his wife. I've made an arrangement with Prokhorov. I will be treating them for three years. We'll see… in six years."

"How are they doing now?"

"Quite well. I keep the virus under control."

While we were engaged in this amazing conversation, the medication arrived – a paper bag full of herbs. We opened it, and I smelled the aroma of mountain meadows warmed by the sun.

The doctor gave some last instructions about how to take the herbs and what nutrition should be observed. For instance, he didn't recommend that Mama drink milk, and he absolutely forbade her to eat eggplant and meat, which contribute to the development of cancer.

It was time to leave. We said a short prayer that ended with the word "Amen." He walked us to the gate and when saying good-bye, Mukhitdin Inamovich shook my hand. I noticed that he did it his own way. He took my hand with both hands and held it lightly, without squeezing it. He had the long fingers of a musician. Yes, those were unusual hands, the hands that had brought good to thousands of people.

Chapter 11. **The Road of Hope**

While Mama was being prepared for the examination, I told Dr. Pace how we had visited his colleague in Namangan. We were sitting in his cozy office, he at his desk and I across from him. Every time my eyes left the doctor's face, numerous certificates and diplomas in glass-covered frames met my eye. This time Dr. Pace was more restrained.

"He felt her pulse and told us everything. And we were seeing him for the first time."

"What exactly did he tell you? What 'everything'?"

"Well… He was sure that it had all begun after Mama had a miscarriage, after the scraping was done improperly. In the uterus… he…" I stumbled, "found two scratches. They were the reason everything began..."

I grew silent. The doctor was silent too. It was difficult for me to continue, and I myself understood how strange my story might seem to him.

"You see, now, of course, that's not the point. Doctor Umarov said that it was already in her liver." I realized that I was expressing my thoughts the same way the tabib had done, in other words, as simply as he, trying not to use medical terms.

"In the liver?" Dr. Pace shook his head. "I ordered a liver test. The result didn't confirm that. So what did he prescribe to treat your mother?"

"A combination of herbs."

"What herbs?"

"The combination was created especially for her. There are hundreds of herbs in his pharmacy."

"Mmm, yes. American Indians also used herbs for treatment, but that was so long ago. Hundreds of years have passed." Pace's tone made it clear that he considered going back to the past an absurdity, simply because it was the past.

An invisible struggle between the present and the past was underway. There was progressive science with its x-rays, tests, biopsies and other objective proof of his correctness on Dr. Pace's side. And there were just groundless words, a reference to ancient medicine not known to Dr. Pace on my side. I represented, so to speak, the Namangan healer here.

The doctor went to examine Mother.

"The scar is healing all right," he told me when he returned. "There's a tiny inflamed bump there, something like a little abscess. It has grown a little bit. We'll have to watch it."

I asked whether it was possible to prescribe pills to control her hormones. I knew that they were widely used and always prescribed for oncological patients like my mother. But Dr. Pace shook his head.

"They're not prescribed without chemo and radiation," he said, twirling a pencil in his hands. Then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes tiredly. I could see. I knew that he had been tormented by us, by

our stubbornness, and that he was possibly blaming me for that. I was playing with a human life, the life of my own mother. I had refused the recommended course of treatment, which was recognized as necessary all over the world. He had insisted, had tried to convince me.

"We'll check her bones in four months," the doctor said, sighing. "And meanwhile, try to distract your mother. Have her get engaged in something besides her usual chores. Encourage her to socialize more."

I nodded. It wasn't worth explaining to the doctor that there was no need to engage Mother in anything new. She had already found what to do and it took all of her time and attention, made her more vigorous, instilled hope in her. It may seem that there was nothing special about it. Put a teaspoon of herbs into a small pot with cold water, place it on the stove, bring it to a boil, and your tea was brewed. It was like that, but there was more to it. With Mama, this simple procedure turned into a kind of sacred ritual.

"Where's my enamel pot? Have you seen my measuring cup?" When Mama brewed her herbs, her face looked like that of a medieval alchemist as he waited for a philosopher's stone to appear in his vial.

"Mama! What are you doing? That's not a spoonful! Look!" And I would take the spoon away from her and put it into the bag of herbs. "Look! It should be a heaping spoonful!"

"If I brew them like that, I won't have enough herbs for a month." Mother would take a spoon from my hand and brush the extra herbs off into the bag. Then she would close the bag and put it on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet, away from grandchildren, just in case.

Then her sacred ritual would continue. Now she had to start watching the pot – it was written in the instructions "bring to a boil" which meant not to miss the moment when bubbles began to appear on the brownish surface of the herb-filled water.

Yes, I was absolutely sure that this "magic process" had a beneficial influence on Mama's psyche, giving her more strength to fight her disease. It seemed to her that recovery was very near, as soon as the bag of curative herbs was empty.

Four months later, Dr. Pace summoned Mama for a test on the condition of her bones. The procedure took a long time, twice as long as usual. After leaving the hospital, Mama broke out crying. "They must have found something again… It took so long."

I was silent. That was what I thought too. I was even afraid to call the doctor. But Dr. Pace himself called in a week. His voice was vigorous, almost cheerful. "Imagine, the result is negative! The bones are clean, do you hear me? Clean! Six months after the surgery, without radiation, without chemo… I can't remember anything like that in my practice. I don't know what you do to your mama, but you can be proud of yourself, Valera!"

What a blessed state is the feeling of relief! Just a short moment, and neither the burden of worries nor the earth's gravity itself press upon your shoulders. You feel as if you're soaring, weightless. "Oh my! Thank you, Tabib! Thank you, Dr. Mukhitdin!" I mumbled. And I rushed home to make Mama happy.

Soon after that we set out for Namangan once again. The tabib had warned us that he would need to see and examine Mama once every three to four months. Looking back on it now, I can say that we made eight trips in three years. So our life was predominantly spent on the road, the road of hope.

The second trip was particularly joyous. We were going there with good test results, in a good mood. Of course, we worried. But the tabib, who welcomed us like good old friends, confirmed that we had grounds for hope.

"The liver has improved," he announced in his less-than-impeccable Russian after feeling Mother's pulse. In other words, during our first visit, Mukhitdin had said that it was already in the liver. Now her pulse showed him that the liver had been cleaned, and it was possible to hope that there wouldn't be further metastasis.

It was wonderful news. The tabib himself was truly pleased. He knocked on wood, repeating "Ptui, ptui, ptui." Words couldn't express what we were feeling!

It seemed to me that it was that second trip to Doctor Mukhitdin that made us real friends. In us, he saw people who sincerely believed in him, who felt at ease with him, who enjoyed his company and found it extremely interesting. (I can certainly say that for myself.) We found in him not just an amazing doctor, but also an extraordinary person – unpretentious, kind, open and not vain. We were finding new evidence of those qualities with every new encounter with him.

He welcomed us like relatives, and the famous Asian hospitality was not the reason. We could feel it in many little things - his radiant gaze, his broad smile, his joy upon seeing us. He also always examined me and precisely determined my ailments every time, explaining the reasons for them and, of course, prescribing medications. He spent long hours with us, now asking us questions, now telling us about himself, smoking cigarettes nonstop. Doctor Mukhitdin was an incorrigible smoker, and, perhaps, he dissembled a little when he assured us that he couldn't find any harm to his health in smoking.

With every trip, my interest in the science, with the help of which Doctor Mukhitdin brought people relief and often cured them, was becoming quite burning and nagging.

During our second stay, I became familiar with the work of the institution called the Center for Eastern Medicine, headed by Doctor Umarov. There was no reason to doubt the popularity of the Center. I saw how many patients there were. Many of them came from far away. And they all waited for him, Mukhitdin. Even though he had pupils and assistants, he examined each patient himself. By the way, we met one of his pupils, Timur Umarov, a skinny guy of 30 who had a master's degree in botany. He had come to see the doctor three years before, and not for studies. He had a kidney disease which doctors had considered hopeless. Mukhitdin Inamovich cured Timur, but this grateful person with the same last name caught another "disease" – he badly wanted to become the tabib's pupil. And he became one…

"How much longer do you need to study?" I asked.

"It generally takes about ten years," Timur answered, "but I hope to graduate in five."

I must admit I envied him. What a pity it was – I used to live not far from here, but I never suspected what a miraculous spring of knowledge I could have drunk from, what I could have learned. Alas, now I had no opportunity to correct that mistake. But I had become one of those who was eager to learn. That's evidently how life is organized – hiding something from our view, then opening it up for us much later, calling forth our regret, but, at the same time, our thirst for knowledge.

And I tried to quench that thirst as much as I could. My trips to Namangan were like visiting the Ancient Library of Alexandria. Doctor Umarov was a walking encyclopedia. I never stopped asking questions, and he was willing to talk to me when he noticed my interest. Little by little, I began to understand some things.

It all started right before our departure on our second visit to Mukhitdin. We were saying good-bye at the front door as Mama and Yakov went to the car, and I asked the doctor the same question once again.

"Do you think you'll be able to cure her?"

The doctor raised his thick eyebrows, "I hope so, but you should understand. Look here…"

He turned to the door and began to make an invisible drawing on it with his finger like on a blackboard.

"Look. This is the liver... here's the spleen… here's the uterus… and this is the heart. And up here's the brain… and its cortex."

It was an old door of light-brown wood that had not been painted for a long time. There were swollen wavy lines of paint running all over its surface. They looked like arteries and veins – at least that's what they looked like to me. Perhaps that's why I could see clearly everything the doctor had drawn on it.

"You see? It's as if the organs were talking to each other. It's an uninterrupted connection among them. When this interconnection is corrupted – and there can be many reasons for that – ailments occur, including cancer. One's body is a unified chain of organs. One link drops out, and everything is corrupted, just as with your mama."

I realized that I was moving my lips, trying not to miss a single word. Everything was clear, simple. Why didn't they explain it to me in New York, at the hospital?

"This time, I've given your mama a combination of herbs, which will strengthen her liver. They'll help to improve the connection between her liver and spleen. Then we'll try to add her uterus to them. After that, we'll need to improve the activity of the cortex. And we'll proceed the same way. If we manage to restore the normal interconnection among all the organs, we'll stop the disease."

That's how my basic education began. It still continues, for I know extremely little compared with what I would like to know. But the fog has definitely begun to disperse. And now I will try, certainly briefly, and in the most general terms, to explain what I have learned and understood.

Chapter 12. **Avicenna**

Yes, I will definitely start with him. Just like everyone else, I had been familiar with his name since childhood. Avicenna – that's how the Europeans pronounce it, but it actually sounds different – Ibn Sina. I must admit that I only remembered him vaguely. He was famous for something in the old days. It seemed he had been a physician, and I think a poet, as well, but I wasn't terribly interested. However, Doctor Umarov once told me, "If you want to learn the principles, read Ibn Sina. You should also read about him to understand what a great physician he was."

I began to read, and I haven't been able to stop reading.

Most of all I was struck by Ibn Sina's personality, his outstanding talents, broad knowledge and industriousness. That amazing person was, I can say, my countryman – he was born in 980 not far from Bukhara. As a young man, he mastered almost all the sciences known in his time. He was a philosopher, a poet, a musician, a teacher, a physicist, a mineralogist… and this list is incomplete! But after much study, he dedicated himself primarily to developing medicine. In that field, Ibn Sina was a follower of the physicians of antiquity, and first among them, Galen, a famous Roman doctor. To be precise, he used Galen's papers for his studies and he shared his views. Many believed that the multi-volume work "The Canon of Medicine" by Ibn Sina was a very detailed interpretation of the theory and practice of Galen. In fact, "The Canon," encompassed the best of Galen's teachings, but also expanded them and dug deeper into the subject. His work was so profound that "The Canon" remained the principal guidebook and the foundation for medical teaching by European physicians at all European universities for six centuries.

Another few centuries passed, and the natural sciences made great advances (aided, of course, by Ibn Sina's work). Medical researchers, equipped with ingenious devices, seemed to have learned everything possible about the human organism, about the processes that maintained life and health. New theories based on objective data arrived to supplant Ibn Sina's ideas, which hadn't been supported by biology, chemistry, or electronics, but he had achieved icon-like status. He was a radiant image, although rarely do European physicians open his books today.

However, Eastern and Tibetan medicine treats the heritage of this great teacher quite differently. Its practitioners still adhere to Ibn Sina's views and widely use his system of treatment, practical advice, and diagnostic methods. Eastern physicians became convinced over time of what a wonderful clinician he had been, how profound and distinctive his thinking was, how he adjusted his theoretical assumptions with practice. And some of his ideas even outperformed the teachings of the twentieth century.

Ibn Sina approached the most important scientific theories particularly closely in his teaching about *mizaj*.

At first, I couldn't understand what *mizaj* was. It seemed either awfully primitive or incredibly complicated. I read and reread, going back to the same pages and lines over and over… and it finally began to make sense.

The Arabic word *mizaj* literally means a proportionate blend. But, as a notion, it's much broader. It encompasses the natural, most important qualities of an organism. In that sense, the idea of mizaj can be applied to any object in the real world.

Hippocrates and Galen considered the correct blend of the four primary elements and four humors, which they believed made up the human organism and every living thing. Hot, cold, moist, and dry are the qualities that make up *mizaj*.

Ibn Sina recognized that theory, but, as it turned out, he had reached extraordinary profundity in its interpretation. *Mizaj* is the temperament that emerges as the result of interaction between opposing qualities "when they stop at a certain limit," he wrote. But since the variety of quantitative ratios of elements, which blend in a body is essentially unlimited, the *mizaj* of each person is uniquely individual.

Unbelievable as it is, it was precisely in his teaching about mizaj that Ibn Sina anticipated one of the principal notions of the theory of complex systems, in other words, the basis for cybernetics, the science that created the powerful computer civilization of our times.

Scientists call this basic notion "homeostasis," which literally means balance – not the static balance of rest, but rather a dynamic one. In other words, if a system is in a state of balance, or homeostasis, its constituent parts can move actively, radiate and absorb energy, and exchange information with each other and with the surrounding world. At the same time, the system doesn't "swing back and forth." It is in a state of balance and is protected from any extremely rapid change. Its life can be endless, of course, as long as nothing throws it out of balance, out of homeostasis.

So mizaj and homeostasis, in Ibn Sina's interpretation, are essentially the same. We must also remember that he meant that the active, quick, dynamic system was in balance ("interaction of opposite qualities as they stop at some limit"). Naturally, Ibn Sina's reasoning was based on different concepts. He couldn't create the mathematical system used in this modern-day theory or describe homeostasis in modern terms. But on the whole, his theory was very similar to the theory of homeostasis. There is a scientific term used to define the similarity found in comparisons between modern and ancient scientific theories.

The term is isomorphism.

It refers to the way one and the same theory is formulated with reference to different subjects. For instance, every high school student knows that numbers and dots on a straight line are more or less the same. Even though arithmetic and geometry are different subjects, any arithmetical result can be "drawn" geometrically, and any geometric drawing can be written down arithmetically. A mathematician would express it this way: the theory of actual numbers and the theory of dots on a straight line are isomorphic. So, the principles of *mizaj* formulated by Ibn Sina explaining the balance among principal qualities and the theory of homeostasis are isomorphic.

And the great scholar knew nothing about integral elements of the complex system! Such notions as information, information channels, and entropy didn't exist in his time. However, the intellect, sagacity and intuition of this genius opened up the truth to him. All that was multiplied by his colossal experience. Eastern physicians maintain that not everything has been learned from that experience, and many things are either not sufficiently used or simply forgotten.

According to the ancient knowledge, which Ibn Sina adhered to and developed in "The Canon," the world consisted of four elements: Earth (hard body), Water (liquid), Air (gases) and Fire (energy, heat). Each

of them had its own quality – it could be dry or moist, hot or cold. According to Ibn Sina, these elements never existed in their pure form, but rather in different combinations in which one of them would prevail, and as a consequence its "essence prevailed."

The four elements enter our organism with food and breath. Mixed and digested in the intestines and the liver, and then in blood vessels and other organs, they turn into humors: phlegm (jelly-like substances); blood (not yet mature enough to be absorbed by other organs); yellow bile (bile pigment of blood); and black bile (the heavy sinking part of blood). There is also surplus remaining, which is then removed from the body via urine, excrement, and sweat. Humors, the ancients thought, were formed thanks to heating. For instance, different cells in a liver have different temperatures. The fluids begin to mix, and their proper mixing produces mature blood, which organs are capable of absorbing. Ibn Sina called that blood "so perfect that it deserved praise."

Perpetual movement of humors, their penetration into all parts of the body, metabolic nourishment of organs and tissues, removal of unnecessary substances – all of that maintains life. Fine, so what causes diseases? There are many reasons, for instance, even an insignificant deviation from the norm while humors are being produced and mixed (let's say a surplus or insufficient amount of one or another combination of elements). Whenever there is a deviation, it means the mizaj is disrupted. That is the early stage of a disease. It's very important to catch it while it's still possible to restore balance in the organism, changing a regime of nutrition or a way of life, in a word, that have caused changes. If the early stage of a disease is missed and causes are not established, a disease will develop, becoming more complicated and causing more harm.

At this point, it's appropriate to turn to another part of Ibn Sina's teaching, about the integrity of the organism, the indisputable connection and interaction of all organs. They make one common chain in which, as in a chain of electric devices, the breakdown of one device (one organ) may lead to countless consequences – distortion of signals, in a word, the incorrect functioning of other organs, and to "a short circuit." This is my comparison, may the great Ibn Sina forgive me, but it seemed appropriate here.

A wise physician draws a conclusion. The symptoms of a disease, which sometimes directly indicate trouble with one or another organ, may be the consequence of a disease of quite a different organ. There can be many consequences, and the one that caused a disease, that was its source, may not reveal itself right away. But it's necessary to search for it and treat it, to treat precisely the organ that was the first to be affected. If it is restored, the consequences will disappear. If the consequences are "treated, the symptoms of a disease will temporarily become dull and will later return with greater force."

Even if contemporary medicine doesn't consider the teaching of elements and humors to conform to what has been later established, Ibn Sina's assertion about the interaction of organs, their inter-influence, is fully recognized. And it is being corroborated more and more. However, medical practice, for some reason, overlooks it more and more frequently. Physicians in the most specific fields – oncology, cardiology, neurology, urology, dermatology, etc., –concentrate on diseases of only those particular organs that are within their specialization without trying to search for the initial causes of diseases. Why? I don't understand. Is it narrow-mindedness, work overload, commercial norms? There are many possible

explanations, but they cannot justify the fact that this most important thing, without which it is impossible to treat a disease, is neglected.

I've already written about the way Doctor Umarov found the initial cause of Mama's disease – the old trauma to the uterus. Too much time had been lost; the process had spread too far. By the time we met him, her liver had also been harmed. The doctor had to start treating her liver first, and though it was impossible to stop the disease entirely, the efforts of Doctor Umarov helped Mama to live. And regular doctors only threw up their hands, surprised by Mama's survival.

I can also write about myself…

I had a cold a few years ago. I had a runny nose, teary eyes, and difficulty breathing. And it went on and on. I was exhausted and decided to see a doctor. He referred me for allergy tests. Treacherous allergies were found and treatment was recommended – pills, injections. I took the pills and had the injections, but the results were insignificant. What a persistent ailment that allergy turned out to be.

But then Tabib Umarov arrived, and he diagnosed me in his usual way, using my pulse. He discovered that, owing to intense stress, the connection between my heart and lungs had been corrupted. In other words, my lungs had not been providing enough oxygen to my blood, and that affected my mucus membranes, among other things. That was the source of my pseudo-allergy.

Such conditions – they can be called background allergies– are often taken for allergies to plants, food, dust – anything. But they are secondary factors, even if an allergy has been found. And it is necessary to treat the initial cause. And that's what Doctor Mukhitdin did. He managed to make me feel much better.

I don't dare judge the extent to which the achievements of Eastern medicine depend on the fact that it still considers the four elements and humors the basis for the existence of life. But we can easily see that they are sufficient for an Eastern doctor to understand what goes on in an organism. It's necessary to add their constant desire and ability to find an initial cause of a disease, their approach to the human body not as a set of mechanical parts, but as the most complex, active, continually changing, sensitive organism, all of it guided by the mind and spirit. It's the approach that is used in practice – this is what I want to emphasize.

But that's not all, far from all. Eastern medicine is famous nowadays, above all for its wonderful practical achievements in pulse diagnostics and herbal treatments.

Chapter 13. **The Story a Pulse Can Tell**

We were sitting around the dinner table, this time not in hospitable Namangan but at our house in New York. The doctor had agreed to tear himself away from his endless work for a week to visit the city of skyscrapers. He had many impressions, but he wasn't as amazed at our city as we had expected. It turned out that Mukhitdin had traveled to more than 70 countries for medical visits. He visited some of them

quite a few times, so he had something to compare New York with. He had been all over Europe, Asia, and the Far East. He had visited Israel. One could call him a Royal Doctor, for when he went to Saudi Arabia for hajj during Ramadan, he examined all the king's retinue on his first visit. And when he arrived in Moscow, he was taken straight from the steps of the plane to the homes of the highest officials in Russia. Mukhitdin mentioned that in passing, without bragging, though it certainly was something to brag about.

Yura and I (for he naturally came to see his old friend) asked him which of his trips was most memorable.

"The voyage across the ocean," he answered, "on the ship Academician Boris Petrov."

That's how we learned of another interesting event, and only because we asked the proper question. It turned out that as early as 1986 the Ministry of Health had invited 30 scientists to make a voyage to visit different countries of Europe and America. Doctor Umarov was one of those invited.

"It was a very interesting trip," Mukhitdin was telling us. "We happened to arrive in Athens during the annual medical conference. We were there while they were discussing which of the Greek physicians should be awarded the Hippocrates Prize for best doctor of the year. Then I was asked to work a bit – to check the health of the participants in the conference by their pulse – and after they confirmed that my diagnoses were correct, they suddenly told me that I deserved the prize … a great honor, particularly for a foreigner."

That's how we began to talk about pulse diagnostics, not right away but after our other guests had left. That conversation, which I had been dreaming of for many months, became very serious and important for me.

The thing is that, thanks to meeting the doctor, I had touched upon the secret of the pulse code, and it excited me more and more. After I had obtained a copy of Ibn Sina's works, I read the part of the "Cannon" entitled "The Science of the Pulse" with the greatest interest. I couldn't stop wondering how Ibn Sina had managed to write so simply, understandably and interestingly about such complex things.

Pulses came to life on the pages of the book. They sang, and I listened to their music. It seemed to me that I could visualize an artery in which life was pulsating rhythmically... Here, under one of the pulse reading positions on the wrist – and there are six of them – a frightened "gazelle" galloped by. And here "the tail of a mouse" wagged. The mouse itself couldn't be seen. It was hiding behind a bush. And a bit farther on, a piece of soil rose forming a tiny mound. It was "a worm" that crawled, wiggling its rings. And here was a strange little creature, obviously sick, it trembled, wriggling like "a twisted thread."

You can imagine all of that so vividly while reading the book. But how can you hear it? How can you decipher it? Why are those signals so different? Why… I didn't finish the sentence, understanding that I was asking Mukhitdin too many questions. I suddenly remembered a boy whom I had seen in Namangan, in Mukhitdin's office. He was sitting next to me by the window, that dark-complexioned little Uzbek boy, gazing steadily at the doctor who was feeling the pulse of a young woman, obviously his mother. He wasn't just watching; he was feeling the pulse on his own hand and moving his lips. He was certainly a doctor at that moment and wanted to know as badly as I did what the tabib could hear.

Mukhitdin, as if he had read my thoughts, smiled and put his fingers on my wrist. He pulled a sheet of paper toward him and picked up a pencil with his other hand. The zigzag of a sinusoid began to appear on the paper. “Each twist is the surge of an artery,” I thought. Then a second sinusoid appeared on the paper followed by a third.

"All these show your pulse," Mukhitdin said. "I listen to these three spots. The first one," he pointed to the upper sinusoid with his finger, "tells me about the functioning of your heart, colon and stomach. The second one…"

That was a lecture given with a demonstration of the method, a lesson that was long and at the same time extremely concise and brief. Twenty-eight volumes are dedicated to the functioning of the pulse in the Chinese system of pulse diagnostics, which is very similar to the Eastern system. So, was it possible to talk even about the basic points in one evening?

But I still learned a lot that night.

Apart from simple “indices,” – rhythm, frequency, force of a strike, angle of decline, flexibility of arteries, etc. – the pulse has many other, more complex features that help one to diagnose. The doctor told me about some of them.

An artery didn’t just expand and contract. Each of its movements varied. Surges occurred, and it was necessary to know how “to hear” them with the tips of one’s fingers. Eastern physicians believed that an artery could have up to 16 surges from the moment of shrinking to full expansion, and return to the initial point. Doctor Mukhitdin could feel seven. His pupils, after they completed their studies, three. We people who aren't trained can feel only the last splash at the moment an artery relaxes close to the skin.

What do these surges tell physicians? What do they transmit and how?

According to Eastern and Chinese medicine, every living thing has energy that operates at different frequencies and spreads along different channels. That energy is called the life force. (Ibn Sina called it the pneuma.) It circulates through a body along certain meridian just as invariably as blood through blood vessels. There are twelve basic and two auxiliary invisible energy channels, or meridians, in one’s body. Each of them has a name that corresponds to the dominant organ through which that meridian runs. They all cross the body along certain curves and end in different areas of the sole of the foot.

That energy, the pneuma, controls the functioning of the principal organs and systems of the organism. It must flow unhindered along the meridians to maintain our organs in normal condition. But if its flow is hindered, unbalanced, or if it charges an organ insufficiently, diseases arise. There are many reasons why the energy state of a meridian may deviate from the norm. It can be an imbalance of humors, stress, or… but that deserves a separate explanation.

So, each of the three points where one feels the pulse on the wrist offers an opportunity to obtain information about the energy state of one or another meridian.

Of course, it's very difficult to explain how this can be detected by feeling a pulse. It's only possible to understand the written instructions after one learns how to hear.

By the way, here it's appropriate to compare some ingenious discoveries of ancient scholars and contemporary science. First of all, modern medical apparatuses confirm that meridians – electronic, thermal and radiation – exist. I've read about it recently. Secondly, and no less significantly, it turns out that pulse diagnostics is very reminiscent of research on the so-called "black box" by modern scientists.

The black box, just like homeostasis, is one of the basic notions of the contemporary theory of complex systems. In practice, it is any device whose inner structure we know nothing about. How can one analyze it? Obviously, the only reasonable way is to send it different signals and analyze the answers. In other words, to do what Kozma Prutkov wrote about: "Give a mare a flick on the nose and it will wag its tail."

Joking aside, it is possible to learn many extremely interesting things about the contents and structure of a black box. Scientists usually send it the simplest signals, the simplest vibrations – a sinusoid. (Remember the sinusoids that Mukhitdin drew on the sheet of paper?) Those signals are distorted inside the black box and turn into complex vibrations before leaving it. Let's say, if an instrument tuner uses a tuning fork to send a simple signal, or note, to a violin, it will answer him with a more complex sound, since overtones will be added to the note. That's where a tuner begins his "diagnostics." By listening to the violin's response, he discovers harmful distortions, analyzes them – why they could have appeared – and then corrects defects in the instrument.

A human organism is also a distinctive black box. It's extremely complex, unbelievably complex. Today, scientists know how to send numerous signals into it and analyze answers given by the organism. Even thousands of years before our time, the great scholars of antiquity and their ingenious pupil Ibn Sina performed an even greater miracle.

When the heart, our tuning fork, sends blood through the arteries in spurts, the organism affects that flow according to its state of distortion, further complicating the amplitude of vibration of the artery. Ibn Sina, without the benefit of any devices, without the theory of complex systems, received the outgoing signals from the black box, or the beats of a pulse, and learned to decipher them, interpreting the meaning of numerous distortions as a message about different ailments of the organism.

Now, let's go back to Mukhitdin's explanations. He told me that the beating of a pulse reaches the upper point, the one where a doctor's finger is placed, at different angles. Naturally, they all "sound" different. In other words, they carry different information. A combination of such beats, spurts in an artery, angles of decline, creates 48 varieties of pulse. When Ibn Sina identified them, he gave them colorful names, such as "mouse's tail," "galloping gazelle," and "crawling worm," among others.

According to Ibn Sina's teaching, a disease can occur as a result of excessive heat or cold, in other words, according to contemporary notions, as a result of an exo- or endo-thermal process. The pulse also gives relevant information about this.

And finally, the vibrations of an artery demonstrate which of the four humors is out of balance and is therefore harming one of the organs.

"Do you understand now how many different vibrations of a pulse it is possible to hear?" Mukhitdin asked. He picked up a pencil again. "Let's multiply all these numbers… Twelve meridians by 48 angles of incidence… by four signals regarding changes in humors… by two temperature indexes… Well? Have you figured it out? Over 4,600 basic, and that's just the basic vibrations…"

A short pause followed. I tried to comprehend what I had heard, tried to imagine…

"That's not all," he broke through the silence. "That's not so many. I can distinguish 5,000 pulse vibrations, and my teacher was able to hear about 10,000."

"What about Ibn Sina?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think about 15,000."

"So, what does it mean? Such an enormous number. Does it give an amazingly precise diagnosis?"

We were standing on the terrace, and Mukhitdin was, as usual, smoking a cigarette.

"You see," he said pensively. "If I can point to the spot where a tumor is with my finger, my teacher could point to its location with the tip of a needle."

"And Ibn Sina?" I thought, but I didn't ask him about that.

Chapter 14. **"Everything's All Right with Me"**

The life of every person consists perhaps of large and small, noisy and quiet battles. Our family was no exception, particularly when Mama fell ill. However, after acquiring Mukhitdin as our "general," we became a well-supplied army, and we had hopes of winning. Mama was feeling better and better. She thought that she was over her disease and was drinking the herb brews to improve her general health.

And in this way, two years passed relatively happily, if you didn't consider the permanent inner tension. But then Mama got pneumonia.

Mukhitdin had feared that most of all. "Beware of a cold. Be very careful, and don't expose yourself to cold temperatures. Take good care of your lungs," he often repeated to Mama. So how could this have happened?

Mama lost weight, grew weaker and looked drawn in the face. They did everything they could at the hospital, but they also broke the terrible news to me – the cancer had metastasized to her lungs and bones. In other words, what we had feared most had happened. We knew that Mama's lymph nodes, affected by cancer, were agents of metastasis.

It was difficult to express my despair.

“Mukhitdin most likely won’t be able to help me,” I thought as I held the telephone receiver in my hand. But Mukhitdin, after listening to me, said, "Come here as soon as possible, for a couple of weeks."

Mama was very surprised. “To Namangan? Again? Why?” I had to lie that I didn’t feel very well, that this and that were bothering me… in a word, that I wanted to consult him about myself, and she should go along to keep me company and have another check-up.

Mama, thank God, didn’t suspect a thing.

The doctors at the hospital couldn’t understand why I was concealing the ordeal from her. Here in America, they have different medical traditions, different moral notions. Maybe doctors were afraid to take additional responsibility upon themselves. Maybe… but Mama’s peace of mind was more important to me. Mukhitdin supported me in that. He used to say that the less the patient thought about a disease, the better her organism could fight it, the easier it was to stimulate it, and the greater the chance of recovery.

Mukhitdin’s familiar office, his concentrated face in which all my hopes rested… How long he held Mama’s wrist. He’d never listened to her pulse for such a long time. He talked to Mama, made jokes, tried to smile. Then he lit a cigarette, with his other hand still on Mama’s wrist.

"And how is my oncology going?" Mama asked.

"Oncology? And what is oncology?" he smiled. "Valera, do you know what it is?"

Our eyes met. His gaze was odd and tired, lacking his usual spark. Yes, I understood correctly why he was holding Mama’s wrist for such a long time. He refused to accept what the pulse was telling him. He was trying to feel barely audible signals from an artery that refuted the diagnosis, but in vain.

"Everything is normal Esya-apa," he at last told Mama. "You still have a cold, but it’s all right. I’ll give you some good medicine."

At that point Mama demanded that the doctor get busy on me. I hadn’t had time to decide what to complain about, but Mukhitdin, after feeling my pulse, informed me, "You have a slight pain here, and he pointed at my right side near the ribs. "You have a blockage in your liver."

He was right, as always. Precisely now, in Namangan, I felt an intermittent pain exactly where he was pointing.

"It’s nothing serious," Mukhitdin assured Mama. "Let’s go, Valera. I’ll give you some medication."

We stepped out, and after lighting another cigarette, he told me, "Valera, it has spread to the ligaments. The lungs are also not well."

We were silent. I had already known all that, but I still hoped. Even now I was waiting like a child for a miracle... what if Mukhitdin could help?

He looked into my eyes and said seriously, "I can promise two or three years. She’ll hold out… and now I’ll take you to a place where you can rest. See you in the evening."

We went back to the office to pick up Mama and Abduraim, Mukhitdin's nephew, who took us to our temporary abode. It was an apartment on the fifth floor with a balcony from which one had a beautiful view of the city and the whole valley spread out below. We could see people – some with hoes, others with seedlings –puttering around in their gardens near neighboring houses. It was the beginning of April, which was usually warm in Namangan, but this year it was cool. It was also somewhat damp in the apartment. Heating was out of the question. There was no hot water either. Mama was a bit sad after our comfortable daily life in America. And my heart was plunged in darkness.

"How shall we live here for ten days? How?" Mama sighed. "I don't even have energy to cook anything."

But her worries were for naught. A doorbell rang, and Mukhitdin's wife Fatimakhon and their 18-year-old son Khasauboi entered loaded with packages. Fatimakhon was energetic and skillful. A kettle was boiling on the stove, the electric heaters filled the apartment with warmth, and Fatimakhon's skilled hands stocked the refrigerator with food. Pots could be heard banging in the kitchen from whence the aroma of something tasty came. It was impossible to confuse this aroma with anything else. Pilaf was being cooked, real Uzbek pilaf. And while it was cooking, we sat down to have some tea, and the music of the melodious Uzbek language filled the air.

We already knew a few things about the Umarovs, but what the wife and mother of the family told us was more interesting and richer in content than the brief stories told by the laconic Mukhitdin. They had five children, and the youngest was two years old. Fatimakhon was a gynecologist, but she had given up her career for the sake of her family. It was true that during all those years when Mukhitdin hadn't been allowed to practice, it was necessary to earn at least something. The Umarovs decided to work at home. They wove fabrics on a loom, a skill inherited from their parents, and sold them. That's how they had lived until the time when Mukhitdin received recognition.

We talked the whole evening, and by the time Mukhitdin showed up, the pilaf was ready.

After dinner, the doctor called me to the kitchen, "We're going to make the medicine for Mama now." He showed me a lump of some substance that looked like either dark-colored wax or modeling clay. It was propolis, the most powerful natural antibiotic. Mukhitdin picked up a tea bowl, chopped some of the propolis with a knife, put a small piece of butter on it, dumped the whole thing into a frying pan and put it on the stove.

"Butter increases the effect of propolis 15-fold," he explained. "It will be a great help to Mama's lungs."

In a few minutes, the steamy brown concoction was poured back into the tea bowl.

"It will solidify soon. Give Mama a teaspoon three times a day. When you run out, make some more." He placed a piece of propolis on the table. "She needs to rest and take the medication. Here's a new herbal formula, as well. In the evening, I'll stop by to examine her."

We decided that the next morning I would attend Mukhitdin's classes at the Center, and then our guests – if one could call them guests – left.

The next evening bought us unexpected joy. After feeling Mama's pulse, the doctor smiled almost his old smile.

"You feel better, Esya-apa," he exclaimed. "I know you feel better. What great medications I've given you!" And he raised his index finger solemnly.

Mukhitdin was usually very reserved and never bragged. Only true joy could make him talk like that.

"How… Do you really… Do you really notice the difference?" I asked, happy but afraid to believe it.

Mukhitdin nodded.

"If a choice of treatment is correct, it's possible to see the improvement after three doses of herbs. The vibration of the pulse changes." He patted me on the hand. "Thank God, it's already a bit better."

Mama shrugged her shoulders. "I know everything's all right with me. When will you begin to treat Valera?"

Chapter 15. **Ustoz**

I woke up as it was just getting light. I needed to fix Mama's breakfast and brew the herbs before leaving for the Center.

The weather was blustery. I could hear the wind wailing and beating against the panes as I stood at the window. But the sun was rising in a clear sky. The crimson semicircle flared on the horizon, climbing higher each moment until becoming a golden ball. Cars began darting down city streets. Somewhere out there, beyond the city limits, I could distinguish tractors moving slowly across fields beneath the morning fog. There were thick clouds of smoke over each of them. The tractors were old, with diesel engines and chimneys on their hoods.

Mama was still asleep when I set the table and left for the Center. I should mention that the Center, or, to be precise the building that had housed the Center, wasn't there any longer. The building had been taken apart, brick by brick. Those bricks, thousands of them, arranged in neat stacks, were there in the courtyard where a new building was under construction. Patients were received, and classes were held in the temporary annex. That annex wasn't large or comfortable enough, but it was in the same courtyard.

I wasn't surprised to hear the word "construction" from students before the lesson began. But when Timur, the doctor's student whom I knew well and with whom I hadn't been able to finish a conversation before the lesson began, said, "All right, we can finish our conversation at the construction site," I was surprised, or rather I didn't understand. I was planning to visit the construction site with the doctor, not with Timur. What did it have to do with him?

The lesson began at 7:30 a.m. About 15 people were seated around three tables. Pages of books and notebooks began to rustle, as in any school class, but I didn't see a blackboard, and the students were adults, many of whom had significant life experience behind them.

There was Makhmoudjon, a former surgeon. He had already been studying Eastern medicine for five years. It would be another five years before he finished studies here. Perhaps after that he would open his own clinic. So far, Makhmoudjon's family, his wife and four children, who lived hundreds of kilometers away, were waiting patiently for their husband and father to return home.

Ikramdjou Usmanov, with whom he shared a desk, was fifty years old and had been a biologist when he was young. About 15 years before, he had fallen gravely ill and became Mukhitdin's patient. After he was cured, he became his student... his first student, by the way. Now, as he continued to study, he also received patients.

The first sound I heard during the lesson was the melodious clinking of tea bowls. Seated at his desk in front of the students, the smiling tabib was, as usual, pouring fragrant tea into bowls. In that way, while drinking tea, they began an unhurried conversation about a subject they had previously begun to discuss – black bile, *savdo*, in the view of Eastern and contemporary medicine.

Since I was the least prepared of those who took part in the discussion, it was difficult for me to evaluate it. I can only write about my impressions. It was extremely interesting, and I understood how important the subject of the discussion was, in general, and for me in particular. The subject was essentially the way in which Eastern medicine viewed the origin of a cancer cell.

Here I must interrupt my story about the lesson to return to the views of Ibn Sina and other medical scholars of his school.

Any live cell has four functions: it can capture, retain, absorb and expel. A cell can perform these functions thanks to the humors, the same four humors that together form mature blood. Humors, Eastern medicine asserts, are created in a human organism from consumed food. After the preliminary digestion of food, it turns into hilus, a liquid substance, which is as soft and white as a thick barley decoction. Hilus flows through the mesenteric veins and then through the portal vein to the liver, and there, due to the different temperatures of the various cells of the liver, hilus is gradually and consistently transformed into four humors – the four integral parts of mature blood. Phlegm is formed from the liquid part, which, as it matures, forms blood that is not yet ripe. The thick part of hilus forms natural *safro* (yellow bile), which, as it partially matures, forms natural *savdo* (black bile).

As the four humors are formed, the liver unites, or captures, them to form mature blood.

In other words, it is the liver, according to Eastern medicine, that is the blood-creating organ. It's clear that a liver can only produce good, healthy humors and create blood if it is healthy itself. Otherwise pathological changes in the humors occur. There can be many of them, and each can become a source of different diseases.

I would like to emphasize once again that contemporary medicine does not recognize the blood-forming role of the liver or the notion of humors. The sedimentary part of blood – leukocytes and erythrocytes –

is produced in the bone marrow. Their deviation from the norm is viewed not as a cause but a symptom of a disease itself. It's true that the symptoms, in other words, serious changes in the blood composition can, in turn, lead to more diseases.

Now I'll get back to the cells with which I began my attempts at explaining, dear readers. Eastern medicine asserts that each humor is responsible for a certain cell function. For example, *safro,* yellow bile or blood plasma is responsible for the function of capturing, and black bile for the function of expelling. These functions are as important for a cell as for any other organism. (A cell is also an organism with its own heart, liver, kidneys, etc.) So, any working organism produces waste, which must absolutely be removed. Waste is removed from a human organism as urine, excrement, and sweat. The growth of hair and nails is also a means of removing waste. When this process is corrupted for some reason, poisoning occurs. Sometimes it's so strong that it may lead to an organism's demise, to death.

As far as I understand, those were the primary causes of my mother's disease. Negligent uterus scraping triggered an inflammatory process, which was not dealt with in a natural way. Due to the rejection function of the cells, for which *savdo* was responsible, the natural process didn't work in the area of the injury. Cells in the uterus, inflamed by the festering waste, did not receive natural help. Their pathology began and a malignant tumor appeared. In other words, corruption of the work of a blood-producing organ (the liver) and pathological corruption of the composition of blood were the principal causes of Mother's disease. This is certainly a very superficial and schematic picture – I mean my "scientific" explanations, my attempts to understand what had happened to Mama. In fact, everything is much more complicated. It's sufficient to remember that a cell, according to Eastern medicine, goes through 28 stages of development before it splits. It's clear that the stages form an uninterrupted chain. If something is broken in one of the links, a catastrophe occurs in others. Not only one specific cancer can occur as a cell splits but any of the 28 existing types.

I must admit that I couldn't understand the meaning of a phrase Mukhitdin repeated now and then: "The whole of Ibn Sina's teaching is built up from the cell level."

How could that be? Ibn Sina didn't know anything about cells; he couldn't without a microscope. It's not mentioned in his works. But the more thoroughly I read "The Canon," the more often I thought that the principles of the functioning of an organism as formulated by Ibn Sina, and his keen understanding of the process of that functioning, precisely coincided with cell theory. You may remember that I have already mentioned that modern scholarly term "isomorphism," which aids us in comparing old and new scientific theories to find similarities between them.

I would like to mention once again that my explanations have nothing to do with what I heard in class. The conversation there was much more serious. How *savdo*, all stages of the process, all causes of its disruption and resulting consequences were discussed in detail. The conversation shifted from the tenets of "The Canon" to the methods of contemporary diagnosis and treatment, to a comparison of old and new approaches to the origin of various diseases.

After some time, I felt that the tabib wasn't quite satisfied with his students' answers. It was obvious that he expected them to be more profound, to use a more creative approach to the subject, to expand on it by using materials well analyzed at home – both "The Canon" by Ibn Sina and contemporary books on the

corresponding area of medicine. Everyone present knew perfectly well that the basic ideas of Ibn Sina, both theoretical and practical, had withstood the test of time and hadn't lost their significance in ten centuries.

"So, tell me, my friends, show me how it appears in the light of today's science using specific examples! Don't behave like contemporary physicians who, after being educated and starting an independent practice, stop being researchers. And don't behave like those medical scholars who after landing at research institutions and academies mention the works of their ingenious predecessor only condescendingly and quite superficially."

That impatient anticipation came through in the questions Mukhitdin asked during the discussion. He knew... he well knew that the world of scholarly skeptics awaited his students outside the Center. He himself had experienced it after his teacher's death. He had experienced it during his work among high-ranking doctors and academicians in Moscow.

"Ah, Valera, you're so naïve," The tabib used to tell me, the irksome person who pestered him with questions.

"Didn't Moscow physicians see how fruitful your work was?"

"I worked in Moscow for so many years, curing so many people, but only a few individuals believed me."

The tabib told me many amazing stories on that account. I remember two of them in particular:

The son of academician N. suffered from leukemia. Many years of treatment hadn't helped. His disease was progressing. The father of the young man, "the great scholarly individual," didn't believe in either the tabib's diagnostics or herbal treatments. The son proved to be wiser. He began to receive treatment from the tabib secretly, without his father's knowledge. After some time, he felt better. His disease receded. When the time came to rejoice, he shared the wonderful news with his father-academician. And what happened? The "sage" stuck to his convictions, declaring that at last the many years of chemotherapy had worked.

The wife of a physician who was the head of the oncology department of a big hospital came to see the tabib. The tabib determined that she had breast cancer, but an x-ray didn't confirm it, and she didn't do anything about it. Soon the tumor grew larger and was noticed by everybody. She had surgery, a course of chemo… and in six months she was dead.

That's why Mukhitdin wanted his students to be knowledgeable, not only in the field of Eastern medicine but also in contemporary medicine, so that they would become hardened fighters capable of rebuffing the skeptics.

Suddenly the tabib stood up, a short stick in his hand.

"That same bamboo stick, " I thought.

I had heard about the stick both from the doctor and his students. It was the symbol of dissatisfaction. The tabib's glance was more defeating than a strike with a bamboo stick.

He stopped near Timur.

"Well, please, repeat what you were telling us about, but please, don't hurry! Go into detail, all right?" The tabib said, slightly waving his stick.

When Timur had arrived at the Center five years earlier, he not only hadn't known what pulse diagnostics was but wasn't able to speak Uzbek. However, he was determined to master both… The tabib acted in a very simple way. He gave Timur a synopsis of his work in Uzbek and said, "Translate into Russian." Needless to say, it was quite a difficult task, but Timur handled it… and that was the beginning of his studies.

However, the capable, industrious, and seemingly shy Timur had his slight shortcomings. When he began to talk, he tended to go on at length and, as Mukhitdin put it, "liked to beat around the bush." That's what happened this time, and the tabib's advice to "Ponder, don't hurry" didn't help. The magic stick in his hand didn't help either.

"Well... enough for today," Tabib said, sighing.

Corrections and reproaches would be superfluous, for the pupils were upset and wore embarrassed expressions as they left. But how could it be any different?

"Ustoz" is how they addressed the tabib. Ustoz means "master," "teacher" in Uzbek. But it seemed to me that they attached a loftier significance to it. Mukhitdin was their caring father, friend, patron, and even provider. He provided free lodging for them. (The majority of the students had come to Namangan from other towns and even regions.) Each of them was paid a salary at the Center. To tell the truth, one couldn't call the Center a profitable institution. Even though certain payments were charged for consultation and treatment, many patients paid what they could afford. And if they couldn't, they didn't pay anything because the tabib knew how many poor, very poor people there were around. Obviously, only his kindness and unwavering faith in the need for what he was doing helped him to cope with the burden he took on himself. Vast plans, numerous concerns, long hours of intellectual and physical work from early morning until late at night... he usually saw up to one hundred fifty patients a day.

Yes, he was an Ustoz, a real Ustoz, and it was no accident that when his students addressed him, they pronounced that word quietly, bowing their heads slightly. It was not surprising that they filed out ashamed and upset after that day's class.

Actually, I have not expressed what was happening correctly. They were not leaving. They began to change. The outfits they changed into were very strange – pants stained with paint, the same for the tops, some of which had burned spots, boots covered in clay… Some of them put on skullcaps, others wrapped kerchiefs around their heads… Right in front of me, future doctors had turned into construction workers, laborers.

Seeing my perplexed face, Mukhitdin said chuckling, "Yes, we're all going to the construction site."

And then I remembered Timur's words: "We can finish our conversation at the construction site."

Chapter 16. **Stars on the Dome**

We crossed the courtyard to where the new building for the Center was being erected on the open construction site. The second floor was already being built. And though the construction looked quite large, I could see neither cranes nor bulldozers, nor any other construction machinery. Everything was being done by hand. That I could see right away. People were working on every wall of the building. They were laying bricks, assembling steel reinforcing bars, welding things. A blinding white flame was spewing sparks in all directions from one of the window openings. People were constantly walking up the ramp carrying bricks on litters. The ramp would sway like a springboard – up and down, up and down, and it was scary to watch the people carrying those heavy loads. It seemed they would be thrown off the ramp, but no, everything was well calculated, and they passed unharmed. I breathed a sigh of relief. They had passed, and someone on the wall was already laying those bricks.

By the way, I was quite surprised to learn that they were using the bricks from the old building for the construction.

"Why was so much time spent taking the old building apart?" I asked. It seemed that the American time-is-money mentality had taken root in my mind.

"What do you mean, why?" Mukhitdin asked, perplexed, as he picked up a brick. "This one is pre-revolutionary, its durability rating is 130. And a new one's is only 60. Watch!" The doctor picked up a hammer and hit the center of the brick. The hammer bounced back, the brick remained undamaged. "This is the old one. Now let's take a new one. Here we go… " One blow with the hammer and the brick fell apart. "That's how it works," the tabib summed up the experiment. "It's been 80 years, and they still can't figure out the secret for baking them."

We approached the ramp and were about to walk up, but the tabib halted. A worker had just finished mixing a mortar, and Mukhitdin bent over to examine it closely, as if it were not a cement mortar but rather a medication prepared for a patient.

"Wait, wait, my dear man," he said. He picked up a shovel and added some more cement to the mortar with a dexterous and familiar gesture. "Otherwise it will be too watery," he explained to the worker, and to me at the same time.

We walked up the ramp and found ourselves near those "knights of fire," whom we had seen from the ground. They removed their helmets to say hello... Oh my, they turned out to be Abduraim and Makhmoudjon. I had just seen them in class. And the tabib was already ushering me farther inside. No matter where we stopped, he found something to do. Now, as he took a writing pad from his pocket, he discussed the details of the work being done there that I didn't understand anything about. Then he would climb to the top of a wall and, lying flat on it, would examine the brick masonry. Then he would show a welder where exactly a bend should be.

I was amazed. When had this healer and herbalist, this expert in Eastern medicine, had time to learn all about construction? It was true that he had a degree in hydro-technical engineering. But a construction engineer was something quite different, a profession that required quite specific and very thorough training. I didn't dare judge professionally, but the way Mukhitdin behaved on the construction site spoke for itself. He was the same as he was at his doctor's office.

Now and then, Mukhitdin talked to people I didn't know. It turned out that, apart from hired workers and his students, the doctor's friends worked on the construction. Besides, there was a wide circle of participants in the construction, a very wide circle, I would say, and some of them were from far beyond the limits of Namangan. I was interested in learning how they managed to get construction materials, which I knew were hard to obtain.

"We find a way," the tabib answered. "For instance, marble for the façade was sent from Germany, and from Saudi Arabia…"

"How is that possible?" I gasped.

"It's very simple," the tabib said unflappably. "There are many patients in different places, so they help… without compensation, straight from the heart."

At that moment we were standing on the second floor near the main staircase, above which there were plans to build a large hall with a dome over it. As soon as we began to talk about the dome, I saw yet another Mukhitdin – an artist, a dreamer, a poet.

"Imagine a firmament above us," he said. "And the Universe… stars, planets on it… and over there the Milky Way like a wide ribbon… and there comets streaking…"

The tabib's eyes sparkled, his hand with its lit cigarette moved along the imaginary trajectory of a comet traveling from star to star. And perhaps he already visualized patients sitting in the hall to whom the night sky above them, the twinkling stars, the feeling of eternity would whisper something soothing and wise, would help rid them of fear, would help them believe that a cure would reach them.

I don't know what else he saw there, but I admired him and was proud of him.

"Well, it's time for me to go," the tabib suddenly remembered. "My patients await me."

No matter how interesting it was on the construction site, I had long wanted to attend his consultation with student participation. He gave me permission and soon I went to his office.

Chapter 17. **The Scent of Herbs**

When I entered the office, the doctor was already seated at his desk. One of the students was with him, that same Makhmoudjon who had traded a prestigious profession as a surgeon for a difficult apprenticeship, and whom I saw that day for the third time. All the students at the Center practiced pulse diagnostics under the guidance of the tabib three or four times a week. Today was Mukhmoudjon's turn.

This is how it went. The doctor felt a patient's pulse, asked questions that would help to make a diagnosis and establish the primary causes of a disease.

He would give all his conclusions, everything he had traced while feeling the pulse and learned during a conversation with the patient, to the student. For example, "The interconnection of liver-colon-stomach has been corrupted. Frequent constipation."

Then a student would take over the consultation, feel the patient's pulse, and compare it with what he had overheard of the diagnosis determined by the tabib. In other words, he would try to draw a picture of the disease for himself. And after that, while the tabib was putting together a list of herbs necessary for the patient's remedy, the student would take notes and make some sort of outline, as detailed as possible so that when he went over the material at home, he would be able to recreate the case history as precisely as he could. I noticed that Mukhitdin worked calmly and thoughtfully. He even managed to take notes as he was feeling a patient's pulse. His experience as a physician was evident, along with the concentration and composure typical of a surgeon.

As the teacher and his students were working, I watched them from my seat by the window. There was something unusual about the atmosphere of this office, beyond the absence of any diagnostic apparatuses. I couldn't figure out precisely what it was right away. But suddenly it dawned on me: there was none of the habitual irritating fuss that occurred in American hospitals and doctors' offices. Mukhitdin didn't run between his office and examination rooms. No one brought him results of recently completed tests. Telephone conversations couldn't be heard; there was no telephone in his office. Life bubbled outside his office, in the reception area, in the hallway, but here it was quiet. Here the atmosphere was utterly calm so that the examination would yield the most precise results.

And then I thought that the office rather reminded me of an artist's atelier. An artist paints on canvas with paints, while Mukhitdin drew a picture in his imagination, and his fingers also created a picture, a colorful three-dimensional, detailed image of both a pulsating artery and the whole organism of a patient, an organism that was functioning, alive and changing.

That was when I remembered the amazingly bright images created by Ibn Sina to explain each cycle of the vibrations of an artery. Here was a slender, graceful gazelle at the top of a rocky cliff. It was somewhat nervous, hopping and beating its hoof against the cliff. Maybe, the road down from the cliff was blocked by a dangerous foe – a gray python? Oh, how alarmed the gazelle was. First, it stood still, but suddenly, it couldn't stand it any longer and decided to take a risk – to jump over the snake who watched it in one high leap. The pulse of a gazelle. Isn't it a vivid and at the same time very precise description of an irregular pulse? Ibn Sina explained, "The beats are irregular in one part of a vibration when it is slow, but then it is interrupted and then it beats again." Contemporary physicians have found a different definition for that, "atrial flutter," but the essence is the same.

Meanwhile, patients continued to arrive at the office. The conversations were predominantly in Uzbek, which, to my embarrassment, I didn't understand well enough. That was why the doctor gave me brief explanations now and then.

"He's a shepherd. He fell off his horse and the horse landed on top of him. He was paralyzed from the waist down. They brought him here for the first time on a stretcher.

The old man in worn boots and a *chapan* (traditional Uzbek robe), about whom I had just heard, hobbled to the door leaning on a cane. His thinning half-gray beard swayed in time to his steps. Even though his gait couldn't be called steady, Mukhitdin, who followed him with his eyes, wore a satisfied expression on his face. He was as happy as any physician who had achieved success in a difficult situation.

It happened often during his consultations. Sometimes I saw a broad smile on his face. Sometimes I could hear his joyful chuckling. He would also light his cigarette –an additional pleasure for him.

"Thank you, Tabib. Thank you so much," a moved patient, satisfied with his treatment, could be heard saying.

"How can you say that? I had little to do with it," Mukhitdin would say slowly, even somewhat surprised. "I just gave you the right herbs." And he would raise his thick eyebrows and throw his hands toward the heavens. "Thank God. It's His doing. Besides, it was your zest for life and your determination to fight the disease that helped you."

At that, I felt like adding, "And it also helped that you believed in your doctor."

I was absolutely sure that the tabib was a wonderful, skillful psychologist, in addition to being an accomplished physician. He astonished his patients with his ability to make a diagnosis, to discover the most important things during the first visit.

I remember how my American acquaintance, Neil Mazela, a robust 40-year-old man, once visited Mukhitdin when he was consulting patients in New York. Like all Americans he was very skeptical of any attempts to deviate from accepted medical practice. What is a physician expected to do in America? Tests, injections, operations. No pulse feeling, of course. So Neil decided to consult with Mukhitdin, out of curiosity, after hearing from me that Mukhitdin was an extraordinary physician.

"You have strong headaches at the top of your head," the tabib said after feeling his pulse.

"I don't remember having any," Neil answered.

"You sometimes have pain in your lower back… here… You must have lifted something very heavy years ago, hurting yourself badly."

"Maybe. I hadn't noticed," Neil answered with a chuckle.

"There was a time when you fell, hurting yourself badly, as well. And you still have pain here." Mukhitdin touched his right hip.

What happened next is hard to describe. The smile left Neil's face. He jumped out of the chair, moved closer to the doctor and… pulled down his jeans.

"Look here… But how did you know? How? Look!"

Neil's right hip was a bit deformed, and it looked different from his left one.

"I used to go in for sports… and once…"

I had barely managed to translate his words when the tabib nodded and raised his hand.

"I know," he said calmly. "Sit down. I haven't finished yet."

Neil was completely won over. He now believed the tabib unconditionally, which meant that he also believed in the effectiveness of his treatment. He was obsessed with the doctor. Belief stimulates brain receptors, and they, in turn, stimulate an organism and its immune system.

I observed something similar now in his office in Namangan. No matter which of his patients the doctor talked to, I could read in his glance, "I know what's happened to you. And if you don't remember it, I'll remind you about it and explain everything."

The pharmacist Abdulla entered the office to pick up a prescription for another combination of herbs. I had long dreamed about visiting the pharmacy and wanted to take this opportunity, but Mukhitdin said, "Wait… Sit down," and pointed to the chair for patients. "Let's treat you a little. All right?"

I had caught a cold during the first days after our arrival. My nose was running. I had chills. Mama had been saying over and over, "Treat him, Mukhitdin-aka, treat him, please."

This time the tabib didn't need my pulse. He took a small white packet out of his desk and commanded, "All right, comrade general… Throw your head back and show me your tongue… Now I'll give you something tasty."

I opened my mouth, not expecting anything bad, but the doctor, the prankster, tricked me and poured something very bitter onto my tongue. I had no time to recover from that first blow before he grabbed me by the nose, and the rest of the powder ended up in my nose. My body shook as if from an electric current. The powder penetrated my throat, burning like fire. It even seemed to me that it came out of my eyes as smoke, for my eyelids burned and tears poured out of my eyes.

I jerked and tried to jump up, but the doctor's strong hands pinned me to the chair.

"What's wrong?" he laughed. "Be patient. You'll feel better."

And I did feel better. The burning decreased and my nose dried out.

"Do you also use it for yourself?" I mumbled in a squeaky voice, for my mouth and throat felt as if they were stuffed with sand.

"Precisely. That's how we treat a cold here. Now, let's go to the pharmacy. I'll show you everything there," the tabib suggested.

The pharmacy was next door. As soon as we entered it, I felt as if I had been transported from one "element" to another. The air was filled with the strong, spicy, exquisite aroma of herbs. Some of the scents were familiar. I felt as if I were in a garden with many different flowers where you could smell roses, the aroma of jasmine, and something wonderful though not familiar. By the way, I later recalled the pharmacy as not only pleasant but also soothing.

The pharmacy was a large room with many shelves, cabinets and racks filled with various zinc cans, hundreds of labeled cans. Accompanied by Abduraim, the head of the pharmacy, we set off on a tour.

It began with what Mukhitdin had promised.

"Try this," he said after taking pieces of some fruit from a can.

I chewed cautiously and said with relief, "It's tasteless."

"All right. That was *moza*. It has antiseptic qualities. Now try this," and the doctor gave me something that looked like a smooth white root.

I bit a piece of it off cautiously. The mysterious fruit was sweet.

"It's *hirsigyo*. It restores the connection between the lungs and the bronchi. Now wait a bit."

The tabib went to a table, on which there were different vessels and a grinder for herb preparation. He ground the two plants he had given me and asked me to try it. I opened my mouth and almost choked – it was the same spicy bitter powder he had treated me to in his office that morning.

While I was laughing and coughing it off, Mukhitdin took a small can from a shelf and shook a few small round fruits out of it onto his palm.

"This is *vildon*. It grows on bushes in valleys in China. It's a very valuable plant; we pay hard currency for it. It's the basic remedy for cancer patients. As soon as the bushes bloom, they cover them with fabric. They build tents made of gauze to protect them from birds. If they were not guarded as well, birds would peck on the fruit through the gauze. Birds, you see, like them very much. They also use them for treatment."

"Is this what you treat Mama with?" I was looking at the black peas as if at some sort of miracle.

"Well, not just these, but we don't know of any other plant which, in combination with others, can slow cancer development."

Meanwhile, Abduraim, who had left us, was already working with his assistant to prepare the combinations of herbs required for the day's prescriptions. I heard him constantly mumbling as he stood at the table. As I got closer, I admired his fast-moving hands. His assistant was taking the needed cans off the shelves and measuring herbs. It turned out that Abduraim was calling out their names. There was a green heap of herbs in a bowl sitting in front of the pharmacist, but they continued to add more.

"I've prescribed over 40 herbs for this oncological patient," Mukhitdin explained. "Don't be surprised. There are combinations that are even more complex. There can be fifty or more herbs in a remedy."

"What is the average price of a combination for a cancer patient?" I asked.

"It's expensive," the tabib nodded. "Some of the herbs must be paid for in hard currency – vildon, for example."

"What if a patient is poor? How do they pay?"

"They don't," the doctor answered. "We give them the medication free of charge."

The grinder on the table began to hum. The scent of herbs was sharp, and I inhaled their aroma with pleasure.

"Stay here if you like," the doctor said. "It's time for me to go." And he went back to continue his consultations.

I approached the shelves. I could see leaves with bulging veins in some of them, pieces of bark that looked like long entwined nails, roots in intricate shapes, long thorns, shrunken fruits, and even rocks that sparkled like pieces of ice.

"Oh yes, I wouldn't call the work of the pharmacist monotonous," I thought. Besides, everything was so beautiful, so many shades of colors and rich textures. There was something bright yellow, bright as the sun, and something crimson, like blood, on the table. Even the black color was attractive. It was not a boring black but rather had a deep undertone like a warm summer night.

"Why don't you grind everything right away so you have a reserve? It would take less time to put the different combinations together," I asked out of ignorance. It turned out that ground herbs oxidize faster and lose their potency and curative qualities. That was how the conversation about herbs and plants began. I learned so many interesting things that day that I felt like staying there for good and becoming the pharmacist's apprentice. I would be lucky if I remembered everything they and Mukhitdin had told me.

No remedy on this planet is as ancient as herbs. It was not people but animals that began to treat themselves with herbs. It's possible that prehistoric people got the idea of using them from observing animals. However, there were also independent discoveries. Women, who were the support of their tribes, picked berries, herbs and roots. They learned about their qualities haphazardly, through personal experience. Ancient people lived surrounded by nature, in permanent contact with it. It's difficult even to imagine how acute their powers of observation were. They knew more about plants and animals than contemporary botanists and zoologists, excluding the purely scholarly information, of course.

Hunters hiding in ambush saw a deer and different kinds of goats looking for and eating herbs and roots, sometimes digging them out of the ground with their hooves. As a rule, those were either sick or wounded animals. Or, for example, if they saw a deer with a bleeding wound on its leg eating red carnations, they would naturally ponder this and test its astringent quality on themselves later.

A wounded deer with arrows in its back disappeared into a cave. Hunters ignored it while they were pursuing other animals, assuming that the goat would die in the cave. But a week later, while chasing a deer, they noticed that it was the same one, the one with the arrow in its back. It was agile, healthy, not at all exhausted, the skin around the healed-over wounds covered with traces of dark resin. The curious hunters entered the cave, where they saw a dark, wax-like substance oozing from the cracks in the rocks, the same as on the deer's skin. Those hunters, who were commanders in the army of the Persian king Fereydun, collected the substance and took it to the King. That was how the story was recounted in one of the ancient Eastern papers about how mumiyo, the universal remedy that helps cure many ailments and is a powerful antiseptic, was discovered.

Information was collected, accumulated, and handed down by word of mouth. After these discoveries, collection of information and preservation of experience fell to many of most talented and clever people, and quackery began to crop up. The knowledge was handed down from teacher to pupil. It gradually became shrouded in mystery, evoked mystic fear, and was linked to sorcery. Over the millenniums of historic times, as that ancient knowledge passed into the hands of scholars, it was recorded and published in many languages, spreading from country to country. And, of course, scholars from different countries made their own contributions to the science of herbal healing. The characteristics and methods for the use of about 900 types of remedies and plants were recorded in "The Canon of Medical Science" by Ibn Sina. Some of the most complicated remedies were made with dozens of herbs.

Certainly, our ancestors could have only guessed, often quite sagaciously, about what has become common knowledge today – plants, over their lifetime, like all living organisms, produce between dozens and hundreds of biologically active substances containing various classes of chemical compounds. Yes, although the ancients didn't know about chemistry and microbiology, they brilliantly mastered the practical application of herbs, by observing the effects of the use of numerous individual plants and combinations. Methods of gathering and storing herbs, their drying, mincing and boiling, were developed down to the last detail. The methods for preserving the different qualities of plants were well established. The mixing of herbs so that some qualities could be increased, others decreased, and still others created, was fine-tuned with the greatest skill.

I had an opportunity to see for myself after trying the herbs that the tabib had used to make the fiery powder to cure my cold.

I didn't understand and most likely will never understand one thing – how could it be that herbal healing, in other words, using pure plants has been forced aside by treatment with toxic chemical drugs in almost every country in the world? Why has mankind turned away from mastering and improving the chemistry of nature and its powerful resources?

But then again, hasn't mankind made enough monstrous mistakes and had misconceptions, strange as it may seem, related to the development of science and technology?

Chapter 18. **Two-Three Years…**

That was what the tabib promised me. And he did all he could, more than he could.

Mama was feeling better and better every passing month. Her face became rosy and as fresh as that of a young woman. She became merrier and more attractive. She was truly happy at last, after so many trials and tribulations. The grandchildren – they were the ones who became her joy and concern. It seemed that the little pranksters, already four of them, were busy with one thing – organizing "pogroms," and they did it quite successfully. Toys were scattered all over the place. Newspaper and magazines were "read" so many times that they turned into shreds that covered the floor. The walls of the rooms looked like an art gallery where works of the craziest incomprehensible artists were displayed… In a word, our house, like the home of any family with many children, didn't excel in proper order. Did it upset anyone? Mama laughed happily, enjoying the kids' games and pranks.

There is an old custom in Central Asia… When a sheep falls ill, gravely ill, they put a newborn lamb next to it. The sheep often gets better as it takes care of the lamb. But if this kind of shifting of attention to something positive, if such loving care of a weak creature helps a sheep, then it must be a hundredfold more useful for a mother with a loving heart. When my wife Svetlana and I had discussed whether it was the right time to have a third child, we had decided that the arrival of the baby might be a good stimulus for Mama and give her more energy.

That was what had happened. When baby Esther came into the world, Mama was transformed. Now the most important thing in the morning was not her herbs any more, it was little Esther in Grandma's bed. When the little one was brought to her bedroom in the morning, Mama, to save face, scolded us first of all ("The baby is cold again… Her little nose is cold..."). Then she would hug the little warm bundle and begin to mumble and blissfully whisper something. Morning started with joy, and so it was the whole day.

Our friendship with the tabib had continued and grown stronger. Now he visited us more often than we did him in Namangan. After awhile, Mama had tired of all those long trips over so many years. Besides, she didn't understand why they were necessary. And it wasn't bad for the tabib to get some fresh air near the ocean and to take a break from his numerous patients twice a year. It was true that hundreds of eager new patients were seeking to consult with him.

"Mukhitdin-aka," Mama complained to the tabib during one of his visits, "I am gaining weight all the time… Look how fat I've become."

"You don't say, Esya-apa!" the doctor answered raising his eyebrows. "But that's good. The weight is a wonderful index. It gives you more energy. Show me one woman," and here he stumbled, "…who has suffered your illness and looks so well… ptui- ptui - ptui!"

It was nice to hear it, and it was really great to watch Mama, but the tabib and I knew the truth. He had managed to slow down the process, to slow it down considerably. He had managed to give Mama energy to keep on living, to improve her general physical and mental state, but the metastasis continued and was performing its terrible destructive work.

I would take Mama to the hospital for regularly scheduled tests. The doctors only shrugged their shoulders. They could see the healthy-looking woman, but meanwhile, her lungs, ribs, and joints had nodes of metastasis.

Five years had passed since the time we had taken our first trip to Namangan and begun the treatment with the tabib. It was a very long time for an oncology patient who by then had been in “the fourth, or final” stage of the disease. Both those years and Mama’s general health had been won in the battle with the terrible enemy.

Changes began inconspicuously. Sometimes, after Mama got up in the morning she was pale, and it was clear that she was out of sorts. Other times, she felt sick and would go upstairs to lie down during the day. Sometimes, pain in the back kept her from sleeping. Sometimes, she would be sitting on the couch enjoying the company of little Esya, who was babbling something sitting in her baby carriage, when suddenly she would close her eyes, listening to something inside herself, fighting something off.

The enemy began to attack again, first cautiously, then boldly. It became particularly bold in the fall of 1998. Her pain and weakness increased every passing day. It was more and more difficult for her to move. She had almost lost her appetite. Mama was changing before our very eyes... her rosy complexion was more often grayish... deep wrinkles crossed her face.

She couldn’t sleep or live without painkillers any more. Doctor Maria Yakobova, a pleasant, knowledgeable person from the old country, visited Mama to give her injections every other day. Maria Borisovna made a correct decision – she eased the pain with injections in the vertebrae affected by that metastasis that pressed on the nerve endings.

They continued telling me over and over at the hospital that x-rays and tests showed serious deterioration. The doctors worried; they pushed me hard.

"Something should be done, radiation, at least," the oncologist insisted. “Just on this node," he showed me the node on the x-ray. “If we don’t shrink it, she’ll be paralyzed. As to your herbs, they are good for hens.”

I was at a loss. The tabib was doing everything he could. His herbs were powerful, but Mama’s immune system was so weakened and compromised that his herbs couldn’t stimulate it sufficiently. And here they were offering me something that would prevent paralysis. Here we could hope to get actual help. Did I have a right to turn it down? Mama was suffering so much.

But before taking Mama for radiation I had to tell her the truth.

It had been five years since the swirling whirlpool of the unpredictable had begun swallowing me up. I thrashed around, tried to swim out of it but only rarely managed to climb onto a shifting little island for a short respite. I even became accustomed to the situation. One day I would be in New York, the next I flew with Mama to Namangan. One day I would have a chance to inhale the sweet air of hope, but another day a new ordeal would begin, leaving me breathless – a new dim spot on an x-ray… I never knew what the next day would bring. But I knew one thing for sure: I had to conceal, as long as possible, Mama’s

diagnosis, the numerous problems, the hopelessness of the situation, to conceal it from my family, from Emma, and most of all from Mama.

I broke my silence when I told Emma everything. I had to do it. It was impossible to conceal the real state of things from her any longer. She would not forgive me. Now I had to talk to Mama, but she did it before I had been able to…

That evening, I came home late, but the light was still on in Mama's bedroom. I looked in on her. Mama was sitting on her bed. Emma, upset and tense, was across from her.

"Come in and close the door," Mama said. "Now sit down. Tell me, please, how much longer are you going to conceal from me… What is it you're concealing?"

Emma and I looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. What was she talking about? I wasn't going to argue with her. I just wanted to understand what Mama actually knew.

"Enough taking me for a little fool. I can see that you are both out of sorts. You, Valera, cannot sit still, and you hide your eyes from me. Emma behaves as if she is dying… My x-ray results are really bad, right?"

She was calm and tender. She didn't complain. She didn't blame us. She had no hope of easing her own suffering. She just wanted to make it easier for us.

"This is my body, kids. Have a look. I know perfectly well what I have and where."

And she pointed to her spine, vertebrae, and everything else that caused her suffering.

"This damn infection sits here and here… You, sonny, stop consulting with doctors. Stop torturing yourself and me."

I was about to say something, but she interrupted me. "No, kids, I won't do chemo. I don't want to lie in bed black all over from chemo. I want to be as I am… as long as possible. I want to walk, hug my grandchildren, kiss them, tickle them, and give them a pinch on their little behinds. I think I have another year or two. I am not afraid of death. No I am not."

At that moment, her glance sought something – I don't know what or whom. Then it stopped on me. It stopped on me, became milder and was filled with tenderness. She patted me on the head.

"Don't be upset, sonny. Everything will be all right."

"My dear Mama," I thought. "I believe you're not afraid. But it's me who cannot take it. I can't see you the way you are without doing anything. I can't, I can't… How can I explain that to you?"

In a day or two I resumed my attempts to persuade her. "No chemo, just radiation. That's much easier. It just affects the tumor. Your organism won't suffer, on the contrary…" I asked, persuaded, explained, and Mama at last agreed to have a radiation session.

It would have been better if she hadn't.

The room where radiation sessions were performed was cooled to a low temperature to avoid overheating the machines. Overcooling of the patients didn't seem to bother anyone.

"Please, cover Mama with a sheet," I begged the doctor. "She catches cold easily."

The doctor promised to do it.

Twenty minutes passed, the very long 20 minutes of the radiation session. The door opened, and Mama was led out, nurses supporting her under the arms. What had happened to her face? It was gray.

"Valera, you've been cheated. They didn't cover me with anything."

What I had been afraid of had happened. Mama had gotten a chill, and other consequences of the radiation turned out to be no better. Mama had no appetite. She was losing weight. She refused to drink herbal brews. Her depression intensified.

I blamed myself for everything. I tormented myself. Why had I insisted on that damn radiation session? I bothered doctor Umarov with telephone calls. Our kind tabib came to visit. He brought new combinations of herbs that would boost Mama's immune system. Only powerful resistance from her organism could prolong Mama's life. We both understood that if Mukhitdin had been with us, he would have noticed any slight changes in Mama's condition. He could have prevented some things. But what could we do? There, in Namangan, his students and his hundreds of patients awaited him. The telephone helped out. After asking me many detailed questions, Mukhitdin would give some advice and send new combinations of herbs.

By midsummer of 1999 Mama felt awful. It was necessary to send her to the hospital to have liquid pumped out of her lungs several times.

"Mama is tired. Ah, she's so very tired," I repeated to myself. I could see that, but there was something else I wasn't aware of. Not only was she not afraid of dying, she wanted to leave this world.

How strange it was. We had switched roles. Now it was Mama who had a secret – a desire to pass away. It was her secret because even now she did everything possible not to upset us, her children. She tolerated pain without complaining. She only asked for a stronger painkiller. Out of love and pity for us, she tried to deceive us, just as we had deceived her before. She hid her secret, and I didn't notice or sense anything at all. I was striving to do what I had been doing – to prolong, prolong, prolong her life, which was so dear to us but so torturous and unbearable for her…

...Mama was at the hospital again. We were in her room, I and Dr. Spivak, her physician, a man my age with a kind face and broad shoulders. Mama lay with her eyes closed. An intravenous drip attached to her arm, so thin and motionless. The doctor put his hand on my shoulder and motioned with his head at the door. We left the room.

"Doctor, what about another…" "I uttered one of the thoughts that crossed my mind at feverish speed.

"Valera," the doctor interrupted me, his eyes sad. "Valera, it's not often that we meet children like you and your sister. Your mama… Everyone on this floor talks about you, about how much you love her and

take care of her. They all see it, Valera. But you don't see the most important thing. Your mama wants to die. She has no strength to continue suffering."

At first, I didn't quite understand him. What nonsense was that? Mama didn't want to live? She had no more strength? That meant it was necessary to help her to mobilize her energy. It was necessary to bring back her desire to live. That's what we were striving for. Who could stop children's desire to prolong their mother's life? That was our right.

Dr. Spivak was looking at me sadly and calmly.

"Valera… it's her life. It's her right to live or not to live. I am doing everything possible to prolong her life. But she doesn't want it. She told me herself… herself. There's a limit to one's strength. It's something one's soul dictates. Believe me, I'm a physician. Think about it… You've done all you could do."

Emma, my little sister, was waiting for me in the corridor. We hadn't seen each other since the day before.

"Valery," she said. "Mama wants to pass away. Mama's requesting…"

And Emma told me that the night before, when she was in Mama's room, Dr. Spivak had stopped by to give an injection of painkiller. Mama thought it was the injection that would allow her to pass away. She cried happy tears and blessed the doctor…

Emma interpreted her blessing…

Then the three of them were crying…

The three of them were in agreement. Now it was up to me to consent.

Chapter 19. **Give Me Your Advice, Mama**

It's me, Mama, Valera, your son. Let's talk. I need your advice. You don't need to answer me. Just listen.

We've been together for such a long time, actually not that long… You've always been by my side. I can't imagine life without you. You've always supported me. You've always been my friend. Remember, I've always asked for your advice, and even when you answered, 'Do as you find proper, sonny,' it was important for me to hear your voice.

And now… I also need your advice.

It concerns a woman, a young good-looking woman. I remember her very healthy… She's very dear to me. We've always been together…

Mom, do you remember how we laughed when you told me about my two-year-old redheaded self running around our courtyard with my empty potty, banging it against the walls like a hammer?

Mom, do you remember taking us to Grandma's place in the Old City before going to work? Do you remember our walk to the streetcar stop? You had Emma in your arms, and I ran behind you, barely managing to keep up with you and whining. "Mom, Emma ei, Emma ei, I opp-la!" And you would answer, "But she's your little sister."

Remember about the cigarettes? How old was I? Must have been 18… You must have seen a pack of cigarettes. I thought, "Now I'll get a scolding." Cigarettes were taboo in our family. Well, any of my friends would have gotten a scolding for that. But you did it in a very special way. I don't remember you ever scolding anyone. You sat down next to me and told me a funny story about your brother and cigarettes. We were both laughing so hard.

Well… What did I want to tell you? You see, this woman, my friend, is not well, not at all. And the doctor says that I must part with her, that I must leave her alone, only help her to reduce the pain. What should I do with this pain that's in my heart? What should I do? I don't want it. I can't let her go. Mama, I don't want to give up! We've been fighting for so many years.

Mama, can you hear me? I need your advice…

Her answer came a few hours later.

It seemed to me that she was dozing or semi-conscious. Then suddenly her eyes were wide open and she tore off the oxygen mask. I rushed to put it back, but she held the mask firmly in her hand. I tried to take it away from her, tried to persuade her, "Mama, you need to put it back on." Looking at something up above, she wheezed, "That's enough! Everything's been done…"

I still managed to get the mask back on, even though I knew I had her answer.

Mama passed away on a warm September morning. It was a few days before the Jewish High Holy Days.

She passed away quietly. We were all at her bedside.

That day was Labor Day and the cemetery was closed. They opened it for us and arranged the burial, as Mama would say, by God's will.

It had been raining since morning. The weather cried along with us. Then the sky was revealed, and the sun shone over that green suburban place in Long Island, warming the soil that had been waiting for Mama for such a long time.

Chapter 20. **"After I'm Gone…"**

That's what Mama used to say shortly before her death, telling us precisely and in detail about what would happen after she was gone, about forthcoming events, important and insignificant.

Before her body was cold, all that began to happen.

The week of remembrance begins right after the funeral. This week is called shiva, which means “seven” in Hebrew. Children, brothers and sisters of the deceased spend it together according to the custom. They spend a week at home remembering and talking about the deceased.

That was what we dedicated our time to. Emma, as well as Avner and Marusya, Mother’s brother and sister, spent that week at our house. We were sitting on the rug-covered floor near the couch in the living room. That was also a part of the ritual – being comfortable was not allowed.

How strange it was to talk about our mama in the past tense, strange and difficult, unbelievably difficult. Yes, today she had been buried and she was no longer with us. I knew it, I remembered, but the feeling that she was still here didn’t want to deal with that. She was not there, but why did I hear her footsteps on the staircase coming down from her bedroom? The steps of the staircase creaked slightly, one after another… eight… nine… And exactly where it had always happened, a short pause. Mama had reached the middle of the staircase and stopped for a moment to take in the part of the living room she could see. One of her feet was in midair for she was about to continue descending the steps. When she saw all of us sitting on the floor, she shook her head in perplexity and lit us all up, the room and the whole world, with her unforgettable sunny smile.

I shook my head and the vision disappeared, but the pain that had settled in my chest remained. A minute passed, and Mama was there, sitting on her favorite corner of the couch, right near the spot on the couch on which I was leaning. I moved my elbow away and shook my head again.

"There is no doubt about it," Uncle Avner said, as if he felt the same thing I did. "There is no doubt about it. Mama’s spirit is hovering over us. It sees and hears everything. It protects us."

My sister nodded, her face mournful. Perhaps it was more difficult for her than it was for me. I had concealed the true state of things from her for so many years. I had been protecting her from grief, but now the grief befell her unprepared soul with such terrible force. I knew that Emma reproached me, that she was even angry, but I had done it out of love for her, out of love. After Mama passed away, we grew somewhat closer. We felt our blood relation even stronger. And now we wouldn’t want anything to harm our friendship… Hadn’t Mama meant it when she often repeated an Asian saying, “Blood relatives are drawn to blood relatives, just as strangers are drawn to each other.”

What a pity I hadn’t written down Mama’s sayings. They had always been wise and pointed. Many things I heard from her had been handed down from parents to children for centuries. She had such a clear mind. Now it was our turn to hand them down to our children. Would we be able to? I hadn't written down anything I had heard. I had always thought that I would have time to do it, always thought that parents would always be there for us…

Emma, dressed in black, sighed again. She sat, resting her cheek on her hand. She was tall and slender – any outfit was becoming on her.

"Mama gave it to me," she said, patting her blouse, after she caught my eye. "A year ago she said, 'You’ll wear it for my funeral.' And I did. In general, do you notice that everything is happening the way she

said it would?" Oh Mama, Mama, how did you know it all beforehand? You knew everything down to the last small detail.

I nodded. I could also tell her something. "When I'm gone," she used to say, "they will all come to my funeral… you'll see… to make up with you."

"They all..." I saw them at the synagogue this morning just as Mama had said – aged, with gray hair. Never mind them. I didn't want to think about them, to remember anything, to talk about anything… neither now nor during the funeral, as I was standing by the synagogue. It was solemn and quiet there. The white columns, the high ceiling, the resounding granite floors... A morning breeze, tender and warm, was flowing into the synagogue through the massive wide-open door. It was blowing on my head, playing with my hair... Was it just the wind? It was Mama's day… Her spirit was soaring above us, and nothing bothered it now. All it had was love, love, love for us…

"The spirit of the deceased," I heard Uncle Avner's voice. Our thoughts and feelings were interwoven in the most amazing way that day. "The spirit, though bodiless and invisible, is endowed with limitless power and of course it can read our thoughts… Who knows? It can even appear if we summon it. We sometimes feel it."

"Yes, yes," my sister nodded.

"Look here," the uncle said. "I remember how I buried my mother, your Grandma Abigai… The winter weather was very bitter as we were taking her body from Tashkent to Samarkand to bury her next to Grandpa. That's how she wanted it. I don't know how we managed to get over the mountain pass. It was awfully slippery. As we were approaching the city, I thought, how will we be able to bury her? The ground is too frozen to dig a grave."

Uncle pressed his knees against his chest and cleared his throat.

"You may explain it as you like, but I say that the spirit of a deceased person is endowed with power. As we approached Samarkand, considerable warming began. Ice started melting on the road, turning into slush. We buried your Grandma Abigai that day. Her spirit must have heard about our worries and helped us," the agitated uncle said.

It's possible to laugh at superstitions, to reject them as much as you want, to understand that they don't stand up to the harsh criticism of reason, that they are nothing but soothing fairy tales we inherit from our childhood, but people need these fairy tales. They ennoble us. They help us live. And when we love our dear ones, they help us to feel their presence, not just in our memory but also in nature, in the universe, so let's allow ourselves to be superstitious if that is healthy for our souls.

As for Emma, she supported Uncle ardently, having no doubts about the unlimited power of spirits. In Uncle Avner she found a person to talk to who shared her views. Emma had become engrossed in mystic literature. She endlessly read books about karma and fortunetelling, and she could talk about those subjects for hours. She and Mama used to discuss them very seriously. My attempts to interfere –to express doubts, for instance, or make a joke – were usually interrupted by an exclamation from Emma,

“Get out of here, Valera, cut the crap! Don’t interfere in girls’ affairs!” and they would both break up laughing.

Yes, Mama also believed in spirits and life after death. But didn’t I long for that now too? Didn’t I feel her presence here among us with all my being?

As for Uncle Avner, he reasoned about Mama’s journey after death as about something well known and indisputable.

"Now, up there," he pointed at the sky, "Ester is on trial. It’s being decided where she will go – to heaven or to hell. And you, children, are a part of it. Your behavior in the first 30 days, how you observe the laws and rituals is taken into account most strictly."

Uncle didn’t say by whom exactly it was “taken into account,” but even so, it was clear – by Him, the Supreme Judge and Ruler of human fates.

It was beyond all comprehension, I thought. How does He manage to trace billions of people in His charge and billions of billions of souls of the deceased? Our Earth, the Planet of Life, is most likely not the only one. I squinted, trying to imagine the universe, the Milky Way, and the galaxy. I lost count of the numbers, got confused about the number of zeros after the number one. I became dizzy and felt like a tiny particle of this infinite world, created by someone else, swept up in motion…

…Truly, only the One who has unlimited unimaginable power that cannot be measured by any of the means at the disposal of a human mind could become Creator and then Master of the Universe.

The clinking of plates brought me back to earth, to our living room. That was my wife Svetlana, who was busy in the kitchen while we indulged in devout thoughts. Svetlana got it more than any of us. The week of remembrance was the week of taking care of us, of uninterrupted chores for her, and that was apart from her usual responsibilities as a wife, mother and working woman. Customs…

As evening arrived, Emma and I went out onto the veranda. What could be more beautiful than an autumn evening? The wind had brought coolness and the delicate fragrance of flowers whose petals still shone through the greenery. The crowns of trees, still green, were painted gold here and there as nature prepared to change its attire. Silence... the deep silence of evening... a confluence of beauty and sadness. “A dreary time! And yet – enchantment for the eyes!…” Mama had chosen the proper time to pass away.

But autumn was also a special time, a very important time for Nature. Autumn was the season of transformation, preparation for the severe trials of winter.

We people are an integral part of nature. We live in rhythm with it. But were we ready for our transformation, for the forthcoming trials after the loss of our beloved?

The transformation of my soul began. How would I cope with it?

Chapter 21. Is it Easy to Be a Jew?

No it's not. I've known it since childhood. I knew it not through hearsay. I knew it through personal experience. But only now, after Mama's death, did I understand the full extent of what it meant to be a Jew. And it didn't come easily, though for quite different reasons. Now, no one insulted my ethnic (or religious) dignity. Now, I myself was learning how to behave with dignity – in accordance with rules and customs that the Jewish people have known since ancient times.

I had arrived at that decision – to be precise, the decision hit me, for I had no doubts about it – for two reasons.

The first reason – I felt and knew that Mama would want it that way now. Now and then, she would drop a "When I am gone…" She, who had grown up with Jewish traditions, would be pleased if her son expressed the grief of his loss the way it was ordered in religious laws. To do what Mama wanted me to do – how else could I have expressed my love for her?

The second reason – I felt the need of it. Was it the call of blood? Was it a hope of finding help and consolation? I didn't know. Most likely it was both.

The first week of mourning, the one relatives spend at home, was over. The *Shloshim*, literally "30," began. In other words, those 30 days when men didn't shave or cut their hair, and, even though they went back to work, they prayed in a synagogue every morning and evening. Mourning for parents, including visits to the synagogue, lasted for a year.

I don't want to pretend it was easy for me – I was alarmed, I was tense, and not because of changes in my everyday life. The forthcoming emotional changes were to be much more difficult.

To go to the synagogue twice a day, in the morning and evening, seven days a week for a whole year only for decorum, for the sake of being seen there, to go as a not-very-industrious student goes to school because he has to… and pretends to be listening while exchanging remarks with his classmates? No, that was not what I wanted. And I knew that it wouldn't be that way. I knew that I would go to the synagogue with an open heart. But would my heart take in what I would hear there? Would it take it in truly so that it would become mine? That I didn't know. My very limited experience didn't console me with an answer.

I was very lucky to have Uncle Avner by my side during the first week of my new religious life. It's always easier when a close relative is by your side. On top of that, Uncle knew Jewish rituals quite well and had always observed them. That could be said of all Central Asian Jews, particularly those from Bukhara. Unlike Jews who lived in Russia, the Jews of the Central Asian countries always respected ancient customs and religious tenets. No matter how poor a family was, they always tried to give their children at least some Jewish education, at least teach them to read Hebrew, to learn to pronounce words correctly. That's how both my grandfathers, Hanan and Yusup, were raised. But it was only Grandpa Hanan who handed his worldview and knowledge down to his son, Uncle Avner. Unfortunately, Grandpa Yusup didn't raise his children the same way.

"Don't worry," my uncle reassured me on the way to the synagogue. "Don't worry, it's not difficult. You'll get used to it in a week or two."

But I worried. And I had the feeling that I was entering the synagogue for the first time and saw everything differently.

There was a small area surrounded by wooden railings in the middle of the spacious hall, with the platform, bema, inside it. The Torah was read from that platform. The Torah was kept in the sacred ark, *Aron Kadesh* in Hebrew, covered with a heavy curtain, *ptih*, on which a crown and an inscription in Hebrew were embroidered. A few rows of benches for worshippers were arranged along the three sides of the hall. We sat down on one of them.

The praying had already begun. It was the time of the Jewish holidays, abundant in the fall. Praying in the synagogue during the holidays begins long before sunrise, at five in the morning. It was easy to tell us from everyone else by our unshaven faces as people observing mourning. That was most likely why one of the worshippers, a tall bespectacled young man approached us. He, like everyone else, was wearing a tallit, a large white shawl with black stripes. The tassels, tsitsith, hung from its four corners, the purpose of which was described in the Torah – after looking at them people would remember God's commandments.

"How do you do, I am Sholom. Are you mourning?" The young man whispered. "I hope your deceased has a place in Heaven prepared."

After expressing his condolences, he offered to get prayer books for us from the shelf.

"Please, one for me in Hebrew, and one in Russian for my nephew," Uncle Avner requested.

I was holding a *siddur*, a prayer book in Hebrew with a transliteration, a text in Hebrew printed in Russian letters. It was a small, thick book with snow-white pages, thin as tissue paper.

"Here… Listen and follow," Uncle said after opening the *siddur* to the proper page.

At last, after I concentrated, I heard the voice of the chazan who was reciting the prayer. Like the rest of us, the chazan was standing on the platform with his face toward the *Aron Kodesh*. But even if he had turned our way, we wouldn't have seen it since his *tallit* covered him from head to foot.

I heard the voice of the chazan, and nothing could distract me from listening any longer. He was reading. No, it was difficult to call it reading. It was a real song. And what a song! It was prolonged and melodious. It grasped and fascinated you. It was filled with profound, powerful feeling that captivated one's soul. Strangely enough, even though I didn't understand the words, their meaning somehow affected me. They blessed, glorified, honored, gave hope, begged for forgiveness. Now pain and penitence, now joy and exultation could be heard in them. My eyes perused the lines. However, it was not the words but the chazan's voice that filled me with the prayer, and his voice continued to flow. The chazan was swaying to rhythm of the words, and the hem of his tallit stirred, swayed and gleamed like light waves. It suddenly seemed to me that he was standing not in the bema but on the bridge of a ship that was about to tear itself away from the smooth surface of the water and rise to the sky, to the One who was there… on the throne, visible… or invisible, incomprehensible, in space. How dare I imagine it this way? Well, one imagines Him the way one wants, the way one has been used to since childhood. And I... I felt Him... it was a connection between Him and me… and here was our ship that was flying, flying to Him. And everything

we experienced, everything we thought about, asked, hoped for, everything our prayers were filled with – all that was flowing to Him.

I felt festive and full of light in my heart.

And the prayers could still be heard, and the voice of the chazan could be heard. I suddenly realized that he wasn't reading, for his eyes were closed. Everything he was saying had been imprinted on his heart. Not only did he remember hundreds and hundreds of words, but he believed in their special meaning and special power. He believed that they were reaching the One to whom they were addressed. And he inspired us with his belief.

By the way, later I met this person, an emigrant from our parts. His name was Maksim. I had the opportunity to become more and more convinced of his piety and his wonderful abilities as a chazan.

I had many significant and profound impressions that day, and one of them, "the prayer that is read while standing," remained in my memory. It was solemn yet quiet. The silence was broken only by the sound of pages turning. It was like the rustling of falling leaves you hear when walking across an autumn forest, without companions, all by yourself, alone with your thoughts.

And of course, Kaddish, the mourning Kaddish, the ancient prayer in Aramaic, over 2000 years old, remained in my mind.

In general, Kaddish, the prayer that is read every morning, afternoon and evening, is not associated with death. It extols the greatness of the Creator, and ends with the hope that He will save the world in the future. Still, one of the versions of Kaddish (there are a few of them) is read to remember the deceased, and it is intended to help the soul of a deceased loved one. Even the wisest of sages don't know why. This tradition is not as ancient as the everyday Kaddish prayer. It dates back to the Middle Ages. Perhaps it appeared thanks to the ability of Kaddish to heal emotional wounds. The reading of Kaddish as a mourning prayer is considered essential three times a day or at least every day for eleven months after a parent's death. Why not a whole year of mourning? According to the Talmud, the souls of bad people suffer in Hell for twelve months. Those praying for their dear ones hope that their souls have evaded that lot, and they toss aside the twelfth month as a declaration of hope.

It was my first Kaddish. Perhaps, each succeeding one added something new, and all that merged together as happens when you listen to music that transforms your soul.

The worshippers were sitting. Only the mourners were standing. We pronounced the first words of the prayer along with the chazan, slowly and solemnly: "May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which He has created according to His will…"

This prayer staggered me in the Russian translation with its poetic nature. In general, all Jewish prayers are like poems, odes addressed to God, Kaddish in particular. For instance, one of its phrases is worth hearing, it goes like this in Russian:

"May great peace, life, plenty, deliverance, consolation, freedom, healing, liberation, atonement, broad expanses, and salvation be sent from Heaven to all the people of His Yisra'el. And say Amen!"

How solemn and comprehensive it is, what a powerful rhythm related to the diversity of life.

And Kaddish sounds like music from heaven when read in Aramaic.

To my question about why Kaddish is read in Aramaic, the Rabbi told me an interesting tale. “We extol God in Kaddish so powerfully and beautifully that Angels may envy and be hurt because there are no prayers that extol Angels so beautifully. But Angels cannot hear Kaddish because Aramaic is the only language they don’t understand.”

I am not sure whether Angels understand Aramaic, but it is really very difficult, and at the beginning I was very surprised that people remembered Kaddish by heart. But the beauty of the prayer, the way it sounded, captivated me more and more every time I heard it.

Yisgadal vyiskadash shmay rabbo... Bolmo deevro chirusay... Oimen

When you listen to such beautiful words, the difficult language begins to become clear, and the words, which you already understand, escape your lips on their own.

By the way, great Medieval Talmudic scholars translated Kaddish from Aramaic into Hebrew so Angels could read it and listen to it for many centuries. And I hope that, contrary to the tale, they are not upset but admire it.

I am not going to make the work of my soul seem easier than it actually was. Lofty feelings did not always seize me in the synagogue. I would get distracted. I sometimes stopped feeling the beauty and meaning of the prayer. I would become irritated when one of the members of the congregation made noise and behaved as if he were not in the temple. Sometimes, awakened by an alarm clock at 4:00 a.m. (I could have gotten up an hour later but I wanted, while attending the synagogue, to have enough time to do everything I had done before Mama passed away), or on the way to the synagogue in the piercing pre-dawn winter wind that chilled me to the bone, I had gloomy thoughts. “Why and who needs it all? Is it necessary to perform hard and incomprehensible rituals to prove love for the beloved person? Can’t I myself appeal to God? Or to my mama who is always in my heart and to whom I appeal all the time and hear her voice?”

I couldn’t find an unambiguous answer. I had no right to denounce the faith and rituals of many centuries. I could have drifted away from them, but something restrained me every time I did so. Perhaps the strongest pull was the simple thought that I was subjecting myself to a trial for the sake of a person who had been so close to me. Whether it proved anything or not was secondary. The most important thing was that I wanted to subject myself to that trial, that after overcoming the moments of weakness, fatigue and irritation, I could tell myself “Everything is going the way it should.”

Yes, the way it should, and perhaps to a greater extent than I had expected at the beginning.

Turning to religion opened the world to me, a world about which I had known inexcusably little before. I mean the Jewish world, the history of the Jewish religion and culture. I still had a lot to learn, but what was important was that my interest in it had been awakened.

The first thing that awoke my interest was the Torah.

While attending the synagogue, it was impossible not to pay attention to Torah, not to feel it, see it, and think about its significance.

At the beginning, this interest was superficial. The *Aron Kodesh*, in other words, the sacred ark, covered with the beautiful cloth, was where the Torah was kept. The solemn ceremony took place a few times a week – names were called, and the members of the congregation called approached the *Aron Kodesh*. The Torah, dressed like a queen in blue velvet with a silver pattern, was removed from the ark and carried around the temple.

Everyone bowed to it with respect and adoration, blessed it, and tried to kiss at least its hem. At last it was brought to the bema. Its velvet attire, the case, was removed carefully and respectfully, and the sacred text appeared for all to see. It had been written with a quill in black ink on a scroll made from the hide of a ritually pure animal, usually a cow.

I could also see that old scroll, which had been brought by someone from Uzbekistan recently. An experienced scribe, a *sofer*, had toiled without ceasing, rewriting the Torah for a whole year. I could visualize, I could imagine a hunched-over old man with a kippa on his head, his gray beard, the parchment lit by the flickering light of candles… How many times had he reread the Torah before finishing his work? There shouldn't be a single error in the text.

I saw the Torah close up that day. I had been called to read a prayer. My head covered by my tallit, I approached the bema, touched the Torah, pressed my fingers to my lips and said the prayer for the reading of the Torah. The congregation repeated it after me. And then the chazan began to read the day's excerpts from the Torah. He read singing, singing without improvising the melody. He was singing the special song that should be remembered by heart.

The reading was over. One of the members of the congregation lifted the Torah above his head so that everyone could see the text. All rose and said in Hebrew, "This is the Torah Moshe gave to the children of Israel according to God's will."

My lessons in the history of the Jewish people began with this phrase.

The Torah, which was given to the Jews according to God's will, is the first five books of the Bible, the most significant book in the history of mankind. It can be said with full confidence that the Bible opened up for mankind the meaning of existence. It required people to ponder the basic questions of life. It gave them a moral code. It was absorbed by the whole world. The development of the entire modern culture, including Christian, Western culture, was based on it. This book was more important to the Jews than any treasure. It depicted the creation of the world, described the history of our forefathers, including the Exodus from Egypt. It contains 613 commandments – the basis of the latest Jewish law.

I am not going to "discover America" again. I will limit myself to the confession that I began to discover all the above for myself only recently, and I am glad about it beyond measure.

Chapter 22. **Eastern Medicine Once Again**

Quite a few pages of these writings are dedicated to Mukhitdin Umarov, a physician from Namangan who prolonged my mother's life for a number of years. When he came to New York to treat her, Mukhitdin Inamovich would help many other people, and he soon became widely known. That's why Mukhitdin continued to visit his American patients after she passed away. My cousin Yura and I had done our best to encourage his visits for the tabib had become more than a friend for both of us. Probably the word "guru" is most appropriate here. We were smitten with the wisdom of this man of few words, the profundity of his knowledge, and his noble soul, manifested even in small things… in a word… with everything, including his appearance and manners. And I (as I've already written a few times) am drawn as by a magnet to people who embody lofty ideals. One could call me trusting, naïve — perhaps so, but I'm not sorry about it at all. Precisely such people have given me the happiest moments of my life, and Mukhitdin Umarov more than anyone else.

It was obvious that the same thing was happening to my cousin Yura. It was not surprising since we had been close since childhood.

The tabib would show up in New York twice a year for a short time, just for a week. We would spare neither time nor effort to inform his patients and organize everything for consultations before his arrival. We would rush to the airport long before his plane landed, craning our necks to spot the tabib in the crowd of arriving passengers. By the way, it was absolutely unnecessary to try to spot him for Mukhitdin stood out in a crowd like a being from a different world, unfamiliar with the rhythm of our planet. He walked unhurriedly; he was calm. The tabib never hurried, and his gaze was calmly directed right into your eyes, perhaps even hypnotizing. At least I sometimes had that sensation.

However, I exaggerate in writing about Mukhitdin's perfect composure. I have seen him grief-stricken, quite grief-stricken a few times. Once I saw him sobbing uncontrollably as he hugged the son of his deceased friend Makhmoudjon. His only weakness might have been the dozens of excess cigarettes. Mukhitdin was an inveterate smoker.

So Mukhitdin would arrive. No matter how Yura and I dreamed of long conversations with him, Mukhitdin would dedicate almost all of his time to his patients. We would set up appointments for over 100 people for it was necessary to help those who needed his help and to justify Mukhitdin's trip financially. He would see patients in my office. He would show up at our place in the evening for dinner. The kids, who had been friends with him for a long time, would hug him. Danya would massage the doctor's shoulders, huffing and puffing. Mukhitdin would laugh, cringing for he was ticklish, but it was he who had taught Danya to do massage. Even the shy Vika would hug and kiss him.

After the kids were off to bed, long awaited conversations would begin. About what? About everything — Eastern Medicine, relatives, Mukhitdin's trips, and world events. Our Eastern physician understood politics like a professional. For example, when the United States invaded Iraq, allegedly because of biological weapons, Mukhitdin was the first to tell Yura and me, "Bush needs an excuse for the invasion. Iraq doesn't have such weapons. Yes, Saddam Hussein is a bad ruler, but under him, the poorest person in Iraq earned enough to feed his family. And now? It's economic ruin, starvation and civil war." The

tabib had visited Iraq before the war. He knew first hand how many kilograms of rice, meat, potatoes and other foodstuffs the poor could afford. “Saddam Hussein infringed upon people’s rights? I won’t argue about that. And how many countries like that are there in the world? Doesn’t it happen in America?” the tabib grinned. “But no one invades America because of it.”

To tell the truth, the tabib didn’t quite come to love America, “the all-powerful and just.” And, in general, after travelling all over the world, he remained a patriot of his own impoverished country, which was far from a democracy.

"Ustoz, would you want to live in New York?" Yura and I would ask, hopefully.

But Mukhitdin would always give us the same answer, smiling and shaking his head. "I prefer my dusty, stuffy Namangan."

Mukhitdin couldn’t but see, understand and feel how hard life in Uzbekistan was. Many things outraged him. But let’s remember the lines from Alexander Blok’s poem, “Even the way you are now, my Russia, you are more dear to me than any other land.” Yes, he was a citizen of the world in his lifestyle, but deep in his heart, he remained an Uzbek, and on top of that, a believer, a pious Muslim. It was not accidental that his name in Uzbek meant “defender of the faith.” He made the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, every year so he had long had the honorable title of Haji and could wear a green turban. Weren’t we, Yura and I, lucky to have such an extraordinary friend?

I cannot call myself an orthodox believer. But I understand that the Sacred Books — the Bible and the Koran — don't only tell us about what millions of people believed in and still believe, but rather they encompass profound philosophical views and determine the moral basis for human life.

It was the great Einstein who wrote, "A person who is religiously enlightened appears to me to be one who has, to the best of his abilities, liberated himself from the fetters of his selfish desires and is preoccupied with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations to which he clings because of their super-personal value.” Obviously my cousin and I felt it intuitively, and we treated the religious views of our scholarly Haji Mukhitdin with great respect, though I should repeat that he did not become our religious teacher. However, when it came to views on medicine and life, he became our Teacher with a capital “T.”

Medicine… During the days of the tabib’s visits, not only all our time but also our thoughts were filled with it. The doctor examined about 150 patients in a week. (I would like to inform readers who may be intimidated by this number that he sees over 100 patients a day in the Namangan Center.) We neglected our work and stayed by his side the whole time. We were amazed by how precisely the doctor determined a diagnosis by feeling a pulse, how confidently he prescribed treatment (mostly herbs), how often a treatment began to take effect after only a few doses. Though Mukhitdin could treat not only with herbs. I experienced that myself.

One day I felt I was falling ill — my head was heavy, my legs ached, and I had chills. “You have a bad cold,” the doctor said, after feeling my pulse. “Lie down on the floor.” I lay down on my stomach on the rug. He sat down next to me and… I can hardly describe what I felt when Mukhitdin massaged me. He began with my lower back. His fingers, obviously tender (a doctor-pulsologist takes good care of his

fingers), first gave me the feeling of warmth. Then more and more energy began to stream into my body. But as the healer moved his fingers to my spine, those tender fingers turned to iron. They moved down my spine. Each vertebra, each nerve could feel them. It was impossible to tolerate — I wriggled and bellowed like a young bull. Mukhitdin chuckled, “Put up with it, put up with it. You’ll feel better soon.” Then a new torture began. After putting my left arm on my back, the tabib propped my shoulder up with his knee from below. My shoulder blade opened slightly like the valve of a mollusk. That was where, under my left shoulder blade, the doctor stuck his fingers. More pain, a massage performed inside there. After doing that, the doctor’s fingers went to my right shoulder blade. “Pleura… thorax… blood circulation…” the tabib mumbled, giving me brief explanations of his manipulations. “Well, do you still have chills?” Not at all! I felt absolutely healthy. I felt warm blood running through my arteries. I enjoyed the peace, but at that moment the tabib interrupted my pleasure, grabbed me by the skin in the middle of my forehead with his fingers and began to pull it until a crunching sound was heard. After all those procedures, it seemed quite bearable to be rubbed from head to foot with melted sheep’s fat overnight. After perspiring profusely overnight, I woke up in the morning as if born anew. Judging by the familiar symptoms, I would have stayed in bed with a cold for a week.

It’s needless to explain that Yura and I were absorbed in the mysterious world of non-traditional medicine while helping the doctor and attending his sessions with patients. We were more and more convinced of its broad opportunities, which were for some reason brushed aside by contemporary diagnosticians who worked with the help of machines and chemical substances.

Taking advantage of the doctor’s every free minute, we asked him numerous questions. I added a bookcase to our dining room, which also served as the living room and the library, and filled it with medical literature, beginning with ancient authors, such as Hippocrates and obviously Ibn Sina. The tabib taught us there, referring to one book or another. We naturally understood that those brief lessons would not turn us into physicians, but our desire to become physicians grew with each passing day. And we were happy as we began to understand certain things.

The doctor usually brought dried herbs from Namangan. He had chosen them at random for he didn’t know which of them he would need. It happened that he didn’t have the required ones. One time, the doctor brought the most essential herbs. “We’ll buy the rest of them here,” he said. Chinese traditional medicine is also called Eastern. Many people confuse it with Ibn Sina’s medicine, though herbal healing and the similarity of general notions are something that ties them together.

One day, Yura and I went to buy herbs at Chinatown pharmacies.

New York as is known is a multi-cultural city. Each ethnic group, like a swarm of bees, lives in its “beehive.” There is African-American Harlem, Little Italy, Hispanic Corona, Indian Jackson Heights, a few Chinatowns — in Manhattan and other boroughs of New York. There are also Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean neighborhoods. Russian-speaking Little Odessa came into being in Brighton Beach. My countrymen, the Bukhara Jews, were densely settled on many streets in Queens. In my opinion, Manhattan's Chinatown remains the most colorful, not losing its ethnic appearance in this motley community. There are thousands of small stores and shops with red and gold signs, houses with curved roofs, pedestrians with high cheekbones and slanted eyes everywhere. You don’t often hear English

spoken here and not everyone understands it… That brings to mind a joke — an old woman from Russia who lived in Brighton Beach is indignant as she visits a store. “We’ve been here for six years, but they still don’t speak Russian!” The Chinese in Chinatown feel at home without “us” and “them.”

As we expected difficulties in communication in Chinatown, we brought along a botanical dictionary, but little good came of it. As we pointed to the name of an herb, a pharmacist answered us something, or was he asking us something? We didn’t know which. Next time we brought the doctor along. He, like me, didn’t know Chinese, nor did he speak English, but that didn’t impede him. The pharmacist put samples of dry and ground herbs and seeds on the counter. Mukhitdin knew almost all of them, and if any of them were unfamiliar, he sniffed and even tasted them.

American drug stores sell all sorts of goods, including medicines. There are real pharmacies in Chinatown. We liked one of them in particular where the science of Eastern medicine reigned. Herbs, seeds, and fruits were arranged in hundreds of cedar boxes with stickers on the shelves. Pharmacists in white overalls understood us immediately; they knew English well.

By the way, an interesting incident happened in that pharmacy. While Yura and I packed the herbs into bags, the doctor watched the pharmacist who was mixing herbs according to a prescription. The prescription was naturally written in Chinese characters. “Judging by your friend’s attention to what I’m doing, he has a good understanding of herbs,” the pharmacist noted. We translated it to Mukhitdin. He chuckled and said that the pharmacist was putting together a combination of herbs for an asthma patient with a cold.

“Your friend must be a physician! Pulse diagnostics!” the pharmacist exclaimed. And he complained, looking at the tabib, “I have a mysterious pain in my side.” We translated. Mukhitdin nodded and took the pharmacist’s wrist. After feeling his pulse for a few moments, aided by gestures, he began to explain to us in Russian the reason for the pain. I don’t remember his explanation, but obviously, after we translated it into English, the diagnosis seemed so convincing to the pharmacist that he ran to bring the owner of the pharmacy to introduce the tabib to him, and they both tried to persuade Mukhitdin to work at the pharmacy as a doctor’s assistant… Strange people!

The basement of my house was stuffed with herbs by the time of the tabib’s departure. Yura and I had to turn this storage place into a pharmacy — to put all the herbs in cans, attach stickers, writing not only the names of the herbs but also their qualities. That was a hard job. The difficulty began with the names of the herbs. Not all the herbs had Latin names. Some of the herbs brought by Mukhtdin only have Uzbek names, such as *kupeishak, devnechak, tomirdori*… Some have folk names. For example, Adonis is called either *goritsvet, starodubka,* or *chernogorka* in different parts of Russia. And it’s called *baichechek* in Asia. Senna leaves are also called Alexandrian leaf or pointed-leaf cassia… We had to record all the names.

The tabib asked us to write down the qualities of all the herbs according to "The Canon" of Ibn Sina and in light of contemporary notions. Out of ignorance, I first thought that it wouldn’t be difficult. I had a copy of "The Canon." I would buy the encyclopedia of curative herbs, and I would do it. I got depressed after opening a few encyclopedias, for I didn’t find many of the plants, fruits and seeds from our pharmacy in their pages. I rushed to Mukhitdin to find out what was wrong. It turned out that plants used

in folk healing that hadn't undergone clinical tests were not considered curative officially and had not been included in the list of 300,000 plants that had Latin names. So it was Mukhitdin, our walking encyclopedia, who told me about the qualities of those herbs.

After Yura and I were finished with the names and contemporary definitions of the qualities of plants, we got busy with "The Canon." That also proved to be difficult. I won't tire readers with all the details. I would only like to point out that Eastern medicine considers the curative effect and properties of herbs in light of their natural qualities. They are determined by two out of four qualities: dryness or moistness and heat or cold. On top of that, each of the qualities of a plant has different degrees. For example, chamomile is hot in the third degree and dry in the second. Over 800 herbs and minerals were described in "The Canon," and not only their properties but also their impact on different organs. It's not difficult to imagine how closely it was necessary to read and reread the lines of "The Canon" while seeking out the properties of each of the herbs.

You may call me a queer bird as Yura did when I put the herbs in plastic jars and attached cheerful colorful stickers, as well as a drawing showing each herb. I arranged them alphabetically on the shelves. "What's so funny about it?" I was indignant. "Look how beautiful they are."

Though Yura had always liked to make fun of his cousin, he himself took a very active part in it all. Our pharmacy wasn't just a storage place, and my cousin and I weren't just keepers of supplies. We were pharmacists. After sorting out the herbs, it was necessary to prepare 150 herb combinations according to Mukhitdin's prescriptions for his New York patients as soon as possible. We had to buy everything necessary — a centrifuge, an apparatus for grinding dry fruits and seeds, a big mortar, a scale, measuring spoons… It's hard to enumerate everything.

We got down to business right after the doctor's departure. We spent all our days off and early mornings on working days in our pharmacy. It was brightly lit by a floor lamp and other portable lamps. On the washer, which served as a table, there were notes and empty little packages in front of me. I would read the relevant note, write a patient's name on a package, get the necessary herbs off the shelf and hand a jar to my cousin…"Strawflower, corn silk, sage, *senna, salfor*."

It was a challenge to find the needed herb fast enough out of 150 of them while keeping in mind the names of the other ones we needed to find after that… Soon, my memory began to learn them, and my hand would reach toward the place where a required jar stood. Yura hardly managed to keep up with me — now he needed to chip pieces off of a fruit with a tweezers, next to grind a combination of herbs in the centrifuge and put it in one of the small packages I had prepared, and, God forbid, not to add a wrong amount. That was what I supervised.

"Less saffron, just one pinch."

"I know that," Yura would mumble.

It felt as if we were at a conveyer belt, and we were as tired as factory workers. After making ten combinations of herbs we would be exhausted. We sweated, and there was ringing in our ears from the clatter of the mortar and the centrifuge. Our hands and faces were covered with dust from the herbs. The

spicy smell of herbs, at first so pleasant, would fill our throats and lungs, and we would begin to choke. Yura was sneezing so hard from the dust and smells that he had to put on a mask, and that was with the door to the street open! But the patients needed their medications. The patients were sick so we couldn't afford to rest. We prepared 20 to 25 combinations every day.

Of course we got tired but the work in our "pharmacy" gave us more and more satisfaction and knowledge every passing day. After all, we consulted "The Canon" and checked the doctor's notes all the time. The desire to give up everything, to go to school, to become Eastern physicians and to deal only in herbal treatment was growing and growing.

Yura had wanted to become the doctor's pupil long ago when he, an 18-year-old youth who had inhaled toxic fumes at the Institute's lab, was healed by Mukhitdin.

"I couldn't make up my mind," Yura sighed. "Pulse diagnosticians weren't recognized as physicians in the Soviet Union. Besides, I wasn't ready to drop out of the Institute."

This time there was no reason not to be ready for it — he had been laid off. They were cutting back staff everywhere, and Yura had lost his job as a computer programmer. He had been trying to find a job without success for a few months. He was gloomy and anxious. One day he came running to me, merry and smiling, his eyes sparkling. "Valera, I've signed up for the school of Eastern physicians!"

Just look at him! That was a bold step, a change of fate… I looked at Yura with respect and even envy. "That's my man!"

"Valera, how about you? Let's study together."

That would certainly be good. It would be wonderful, but what about my business with David? It had just begun functioning. It was 2000, and we had been able to afford to buy a new house for our company.

I rushed to David to seek his advice. I told him that I would work at The Summit during the day and take classes in the evening. David threw up his hands.

"Do you want to sit in two chairs? No, you'll have to leave the company, though I won't be able to cope with it alone."

Yura didn't approve of my intention either. "Have you looked at the curriculum? Just the practical studies are hundreds of hours. No, Valera, you need to choose between them."

I was plagued by it for a long time, but my sense of responsibility prevailed. How could I abandon my partner and friend? A week or two during the doctor's visits when Yura and I were busy with him was a different thing. Even then I felt uncomfortable seeing how overburdened David was.

I never entered that school. But I was determined to study on my own. I did not peruse "The Canon" as before. I studied it comprehensively, and I found time for that because I wanted to do it.

…I wake up. It's still dark outside, but I know without looking at the clock that it's close to 4:00. I've been getting up at that hour for many months. I can see a thick book on the bedside table in the reflection

of the electronic clock. It's "The Canon of Medical Science." I stretch out my hand and run my fingers slowly over its rough cover. This touch helps rid me of my remaining drowsiness. Carefully, so as not to wake Svetlana, I get out of bed, and in half an hour, after washing and dressing, I am sitting with the book in my hands in the recording center. I've read somewhere that written materials are remembered better when recorded and listened to. That has helped me a lot. In the morning, I record "The Canon" on a disk, and in the afternoon while I'm driving, I turn on the player and listen. I drive a lot every day, not less than an hour.

I made two dozen disks. I treasured them and made copies — one for Yura who had also begun to study "The Canon," the second one to keep as a reserve in case something happened to the ones we were using. I dreamed of recording all six volumes of "The Canon," and of course people would hear about my recording, the only one in the world. They would call and write requesting a copy… In a word, I had always been a dreamer and I remained one.

…Making myself comfortable on a low chair, I turned on some quiet piano music, picked up a microphone and began to read. "The influence of the Changes in the Quality of the Atmosphere... A hot atmosphere disperses the breath and has a relaxing effect. A moderate degree of heat induces redness by drawing blood to the surface of the body. A great degree of heat results in a yellow colour because it breaks down (the components of) the blood which has been drawn to the cutaneous vessels. It also evokes sweating, diminishes the amount of urine, impairs the digestion and induces thirst."

How understandable it was! Even the titles of the chapters evoked my interest: The Mode of Origin of the Fluids of the Body; Agents Causing Obstructions of Channels; The Influence of Perturbations of Mind. The lines, even the words by Ibn Sina sounded like poetry, like music. I wanted to repeat them over and over. I admired the translators who had managed to render the peculiarities of Ibn Sina's language, to preserve the style of the medieval language.

Those feelings didn't hit me right away. It happened after many months of study. I was also proud of myself — I had achieved what I desired. I delved into the essence of Eastern Medicine, understood its basic laws. Even though I couldn't use my knowledge as Yura did, it became something very important for me as a human being. Perhaps any serious knowledge changes something in a person, adding new features, calling forth interest in one's surroundings and yearnings to learn even more… I hope this is what has happened to me.

Chapter 23. **The Second Candle.**

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,

I shall not live in vain.
Emily Dickenson

I've never been an orthodox believer who adheres to most Jewish religious customs. However, my people have traditions that are dear to me. Before Saturday comes, on Friday evening, Jews light candles to remember the deceased. I've been doing it for twelve years to remember my mama. This little candle, this little flickering light lights the bright fire of her nearness to my soul, and something like an encounter occurs. Every time I lit a candle for twelve years I whispered "Mama," feeling that she was by my side. But on that evening in February, after lighting the first candle, I lit another one. Another flickering light blazed up, and I whispered "Tabib… Mukhitdin"…

Yes, I lit the second candle in memory of my close friend Mukhitdin Inamovich Umarov who wasn't a Jew, who was an Uzbek, a Muslim.

In this book I have written a lot about Mukhitdin, about how he prolonged Mama's life, fighting her mortal disease for three years (six years), about my endless gratitude to him, about how we became friends. Now he is gone. I light a candle in his memory but I still cannot believe it has happened…

Mukhitdin Inamovich's heart stopped beating early on the morning of February 12, 2011. It happened in the E.R. of a public hospital where his nephew Abduraim had brought him. Heart massage didn't help, and they didn't have a defibrillator at the hospital. It's hard to count the number of human lives lost to such criminal "technical deficiency" in the healthcare entities of my far-off homeland.

Mukhitdin… What had happened to him? He was such a strong person, both physically and spiritually. He was a brilliant pulse diagnostics physician who could identify diseases and their causes even at very early stages. He was an expert in ancient medieval science. He was a healer… And this person who had prolonged the lives of thousands of people had to die at the age of 64. How could it happen? Why couldn't he identify his disease and help himself?

I remember how, when we saw each other in Tashkent last May, he repeated merrily, "Even 20 years from now we'll continue to see each other." I remember how I congratulated him on his birthday only a week ago… "Tabib, how could it happen?" I whispered looking at the candle.

Yes, it seemed that he was healthy and strong, though Yura and I had been noticing changes in his appearance and state of health over the last five years. We knew – he had told us himself – that he had high blood pressure and was treating himself with herbs and even took pills. "I get tired," that's how he explained his indisposition. "I have 100 patients a day, after all."

"That's wrong!" Yura and I expressed our indignation. "You should ask your receptionist to make appointments for no more than 50."

The doctor grinned. "They will come without an appointment. And if they come, I won't be able to send them home. I have to help people. I have to help sick people."

I am convinced that these words should be considered Mukhitdin Umarov's motto, which defined the qualities of his soul and the purpose of his life. His appearance was proof of that. His dark-complexioned face, open and friendly, was always amazingly calm. It seemed he couldn't get angry. And the gaze of his hazel eyes (evidence of the saying that the eyes are the mirror of the soul) was always kind and radiant.

"I have to help sick people." Yes, I am sure that only that could explain the doctor's enormous workload. He, with his fame, had more than enough money. He could have seen four times fewer patients. He taught and treated his students free of charge; he even supported some of them. No, Doctor Umarov didn't forget his Hippocratic oath, which required "Art, if they want to study it, should be taught free of charge." Well known was the case where Mukhitdin didn't demand the money an airline owed him, big money. In a word, he wasn't a businessman. He was a physician, through and through, a wonderful physician who had profoundly mastered the ancient science of healing.

"I have to help sick people"… As he was saying it while helping people, he ignored his own ailments. He didn't want and didn't know how to spare himself. Moreover, I was struck many times by his other feature. He tried hard to protect people from worrying on his account. I remember how once when he was in New York we were riding bumper cars in Luna Park. I was in a car behind him. I miscalculated the distance between our cars and bumped into Mukhitdin's car. He hit his back against the partition of the seat. After that we walked in the park for a long time. When we returned home, the tabib sat down on the bed and asked me to help him with an exercise. I was holding his legs and he was bending the upper part of his body to the floor and bringing it back up. Only then did he remind me about his old spinal injury, which the impact in the car aggravated. A bump appeared on the spot of the impact. I was terribly upset. Why hadn't he asked me to take him home right away? In response, he only chuckled, "It's a trifle." But I understood that he didn't want me to worry about him, to be upset.

'Tabib, Tabib," I whispered, looking at the candle. How much this man had given me, how much good he had put into my soul.

I remember a morning in South Carolina, which we visited together. It was before dawn when we set off for a walk on the beach. We sat down on the sand and watched the intense blue of the sky grow lighter, dark-gray clouds like a mountain range appearing on the horizon, getting lighter and losing their ominous appearance. A sparkle could be seen in their "belly." It was growing and growing and turned into a fiery arc, and following that, the sun rose from beneath the ocean. It was an unforgettable moment.

Everything came to life as the sun rose. A flock of pelicans was flying over the water, seagulls were dashing about above the ocean's smooth surface, the fin of a dolphin was cutting the water not far from us. No people were to be seen except the two of us.

And then the doctor (he was sitting next to me, pouring sand from hand to hand) said, as if he had read my thoughts, "Every living thing in nature welcomes the sun, everything but a human being."

Yes, it was that pure gift in his soul, a harmonious perception of nature, a need for its beauty. It seemed to me that I learned to feel that incomparable beauty on that day, thanks to the tabib.

After we had become friends, we saw each other quite often. Mukhitdin visited New York twice a year for 13 years. Many patients awaited him here, old ones as well as new ones, whom Yura and I would find, and we would make appointments. As I already mentioned, it had been five years, starting in the fall of 2006, since we had noticed that the tabib wasn't well. That fall, as usual, we met him at the airport. He looked tired, which was understandable — the 15-hour flight, with a connection and jetlag. Anyone would be tired. We put him to bed, but neither rest nor herbs helped. Fatigue and headaches continued day in and day out. Our old friend talked with difficulty and reluctantly, his radiant gaze through his narrowed eyelids grew dim. We only learned much later that his blood pressure had been over 200 after the flight.

Mukhitdin and I had our last heartfelt conversation in New York during that visit. And I am glad that my ability to retain "memory pictures" allows me not only to hear but also to visualize how that friendly conversation, filled with memories, went.

Early in the morning before sunrise I came to the kitchen to brew tea. When the stairs creaked, that was the doctor walking down. Everything had been set up for breakfast in the living room. We didn't sit down at the dinner table. We sat on the rug at the chess table. The tabib, when he felt at home, preferred that ethnic pose — on the floor with crossed legs and hands on his calves, palms up. I was glad that the doctor had taken on a healthier color and was looking better. As I was pouring tea into tea bowls, he was peeling a pomegranate, and, as with everything he did, he was doing it beautifully. First, he made a round cut in the hard rind of the fruit, then a second one perpendicular to the first. Oval segments of the rind became separated from the fruit one after another. Then the naked pomegranate was divided into four parts without losing a single glowing aril. When finished with the pomegranate he switched to tea and drank it with pleasure, one tea bowl after another. At the same time he was looking at the chess table covered in granite mosaic. He liked the table (Daniel's recent work).

"It's beautiful except the corners are too sharp. Someone could get scratched. Here, give me a handsaw and a file." (Mukhitdin meant an injury not just a scratch. He told us about injuries he had witnessed).

He put a newspaper on the rug and began to adjust the corners. I was alarmed for the doctor wasn't well, but it was useless to argue with him. No matter how hard I tried to convince him that I could do it myself, he only grinned.

We began to talk about my son's future profession. Svetlana and I dreamed that he would become a physician specializing in pulse diagnostics like Mukhitdin. But Daniel, though he took lessons with doctor Maria Yakobova, was attracted to mathematics and physics. However, none of Mukhitdin's five daughters followed in their father's footsteps. When I asked him why, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't forget that I studied for 15 years. What young woman would endure that? The main thing for them is a family, not a profession." He sighed and lifted his empty tea bowl, signaling for more tea.

The conversation about our families brought back memories. I must admit that I always wanted to know how his friendly feelings toward our family, toward Mama and me, had arisen. We could have remained just a couple of his numerous patients. And I asked him whether he remembered how we had met. It turned out that he remembered, and in great detail.

"One glance was enough for me to feel respect and sympathy for your mother. She was so reserved and quiet, so dignified and patient. I wrote in my diary, 'This woman has suffered a lot.'"

“I wrote in my diary”… We had been friends for many years. Every time we got together I learned something new about him… like now about his diary.

"Tabib, I was astonished how Mama had a deep feeling of trust in you… right away. She… we were both so desperate. The doctors insisted on chemo and radiation. They predicted her rapid demise…" I remembered those horrible days and my voice trembled.

"Do you think I wasn’t afraid after I felt your mama’s pulse?" The doctor nodded. "But I couldn’t let her see it."

I was well acquainted with the tabib’s principle. I knew that he considered the custom adopted by contemporary physicians of informing patients about their diagnosis and prognosis to be stupid and dangerous. He didn’t use too many words with patients. He didn’t use such words as cancer, tumor, or cirrhosis. He simply explained that one’s stomach should be treated or that the rear wall of the heart should be strengthened. I remember once when Mama asked him, “How is my oncology?” “Oncology? What is that?” The doctor was surprised. “I only know that I am going to treat your liver.”

A good physician has to be a good psychologist. I understood it when Mama and I visited Namangan the second time. He was holding Mama’s hand by the wrist, yet I also felt the warm touch of his fingers. Then his long fingers began to move slowly and smoothly, now pressing on an artery, now letting it go. Mukhitdin smiled, nodding slightly. Then he tapped the table with his fingers and said, "Ptui, ptui."

Both Mama and I felt relieved. It had been three months since she had begun drinking herbal brews prescribed by the doctor. She felt somewhat better. Did it mean she was on the path to recovery?

The doctor’s face, his smile confirmed our hope. And she needed that hope, for without it she wouldn’t be able to cope with the disease. Hope brought to life the forces of her organism that couldn’t be awakened even by the strongest drugs.

The doctor didn’t conceal the state of Mama’s health from me. Just as it would be impossible to stop a heavily loaded dump truck with no brakes rushing downhill, it was impossible to stop the destructive force of a difficult disease of many years in a woman who was no longer young. To slow down its effect, to make her feel better was what Mukhitdin tried to achieve. The herbs helped, along with Mama’s confidence in Mukhitdin’s power. I will never forget the expression on her face when Mukhitdin said “ptui-ptui,” his smile, his sparkling eyes. Mama’s shoulders straightened up as if a load had been taken off them.

Our friendship with the tabib sprang from that belief and admiration for him. Our attitude, which obviously went beyond the limits of the usual gratitude, didn’t leave him indifferent either.

That conversation at the chess table turned out to be our last one in New York. Mukhitdin didn't feel up to trans-Atlantic travel any more, but he did travel to Moscow twice a year, in the fall and spring. Svetlana and I naturally went there a few times to see our friends and also to seek his medical advice. I remember

how glad we were during our first reunion there after we saw that the tabib had regained a healthy color and was even cheerful. We got together at Galina Fyodorovna Solilova's house. The doctor had cured her daughter Olga of leukemia many years before. That disease was so dangerous that doctors had feared for Olga's life and forbade her to have a baby. But after the tabib cured her, Olga gave birth to a healthy baby girl. There is no need to explain what Galina Fyodorovna's family's attitude toward Mukhitdin was.

When he visited Moscow, he always stayed with his friends. We were usually invited for dinner. There were other guests too. I remember meeting Mukhitdin's friend and colleague Pyotr, with whom he had worked at the Institute of Physics and Geochemistry of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. He was the only person I knew who addressed the doctor by his first name. He exclaimed now and then, "Do you remember, Mukhitdin?" And the doctor, usually a man of few words, would join in the conversation.

"Do you remember the man whose life you saved who filed a complaint against you?"

"Yes, I do… I saw a man lying on the platform, people crowded around him… I naturally approached him and felt his pulse. It was clear that he was close to a heart attack. I began to massage his heart… At that moment an ambulance arrived. I gave my business card to the medics and left. That man called three days later and said that I had injured two of his ribs…" "But he forgot to say thank you for saving his life. What a strange man!"

We laughed. Then they remembered another case, a sad one. A colleague of Pyotr and Mukhitdin decided to have a mole that was irritating him removed from his arm. Mukhitdin tried to talk him out of it, explaining that it was dangerous. The poor man resisted. He died during the surgery — they failed to stop internal bleeding.

Doctor Umarov saw patients in Galina Fyodorovna's small bedroom. I was there as a patient. I saw a list of patients and found my name under number 257.

It seemed to me that he treated us like relatives, always asking about our kids. He even remembered their nicknames — Polvan and Chimchukcha. He was glad to tell us about his grandchildren whom he was proud of. "My grandson, the son of my eldest daughter, won the German language competition so I gave him a present, as I had promised." The tabib considered the knowledge of foreign languages very important for both cultural and business purposes. He had promised to give a car to whichever of his grandsons could master 3,000 foreign words. And he did… not bad to have a grandfather like him.

We met Mukhitdin Inamovich in Moscow for four years. When everything is all right in one's life, it seems that it will be that way forever. Troubles arrive unexpectedly. Once, in the winter of 2010, we learned the terrible news from Galina Fyodorovna that the tabib's daughter Dilfusa had been killed in a car accident on Christmas night. She was the eldest of his five daughters, the most beloved, a talented, brilliant person.

Is there anything worse than the grief of losing a child? We suffered, imagining how devastated this person who so close and dear to us was. We were so used to his constant help. And now he needed it himself.

So, after a seven-year break we went back to Uzbekistan. A long line of patients, about 30 people, could be seen at the door of the one-story building of the Railroad Workers Hospital where Mukhtdin's Tashkent Center was located. There were many women in ethnic silk dresses with long jet-black hair.

On entering the reception area I saw Mukhitdin at his desk at the back of the office behind a loosely closed curtain, and my heart skipped a beat. The doctor, as always, wore a starched snow-white shirt, his face thoroughly shaven, but what a thin exhausted face it was, and how much gray hair he had.

A woman's sniffling could be heard from his office. The doctor calmed her down, "Your disease is at the very beginning. We'll overcome it." He was calming her down, but how unusually weak his voice was.

That was out last encounter. I will never forget it. I won't forget our last parting. I hugged the doctor, feeling the warmth of his body. Clinging to him with particular tenderness, I whispered, "Take good care of yourself." He patted me on the back…

Yes, our last encounter was sad, as was our visit to Uzbekistan. But during that visit, as in the ones before, there were moments when I rejoiced with all my heart at my encounter with my homeland. It was May, the most beautiful time in Uzbekistan. The greenery of the city, the blossoms and fragrance of its orchards, the outdoor markets piled with vegetables and first fruits. As I went out onto the balcony, I watched the sun rise from behind the peaks of the Tian Shan, covered in snow. What a sight! And again I remembered Mukhitdin's words: "Every living thing in nature welcomes the sunrise." There were swallows and swifts flitting around, crisscrossing the sky. The voices of children could be heard from the yard. Birds were catching insects, children frolicking together at the gate of the kindergarten, and they all seemed to welcome the sunrise…

The sunrise, the birds and the children were forming a beautiful picture of being. This state of bliss gripped me for a few moments, but then my heart sank from the pain again – Mukhitdin… Would he be able to bear that enormous spiritual and physical strain after such a blow? His pupils, hundreds of patients, his enormous work as an herbalist, a researcher, regular trips (once every two weeks) from the Tashkent Center to Namangan…

And then I remembered Mikhail Blay, my mama's old doctor. Once I found him very ill at his office — he had a weak heart. I asked him why he wasn't at home. "And who will take care of my patients?" The doctor answered in surprise.

Yes, there is a noble breed of people with special souls, not many of them. They are the best of what mankind has created. They need "to cool one pain" from someone's life. Otherwise they cannot live.

That's how the tabib lived, until his heart stopped beating.

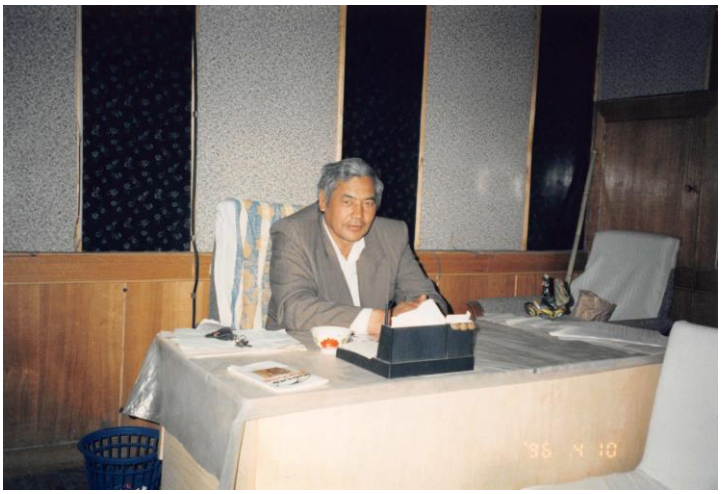
In the book about Eastern Medicine and about Mukhitdin Umarov's place in it, his pupils ranked him on a par with Hippocrates, Galen, and other great physicians. I often remember that when I light a Sabbath candle dedicated to Tabib Mukhitdin Inamovich Umarov. I am proud that this wonderful man was my friend.

The End.

Ester with first grandchild Daniel (1988)

First meeting with Doctor Umarov in Namangan (June 1993)
Mukhitdin Umarov is seated second from the right

Tabib with my aunt and family during first New York City visit in 1994



Doctor Umarov in his office

Student studies at the 'Center For Eastern Medicine' in Namangan

Herbal Pharmacy in the 'Center For Eastern Medicine'

Last meeting with Doctor Umarov (Summer 2010)