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Extract from the novel SALAM, DALGAT!

Dalgat felt bad as soon as he entered the crush of the bazaar but found some respite in the shelter of the separate stalls. Even then he was still overwhelmed by washing powders and household soaps, then dazzled by the sunny gleam of shampoos, wire dish brushes, hair ties and bands, cellophane packets of henna, basma and laurel bunches.

Then in another rush of colour he found himself hemmed in by brassieres with enormous cups, heaps of cheap, gaudy lingerie, and twice he got wedged between two heavysset women as they rummaged for items in the aisle.

“Buy these young man, you won’t regret it,” screeched a gold-toothed shop assistant of about forty, shaking with laughter as she flapped a pair of red panties under his nose, triggering a wave of female mirth around her.

After he extricated himself from the narrow paths between the stalls, Dalgat found himself in the bright sunshine again, only narrowly escaping being knocked down by a filthy iron trolley that flew round the corner with a clatter, pushed by a shabbily dressed man.

“Gang way, mind your backs!” came a low coarse shout swallowed by a local pop star’s voice coming from the loudspeakers. “Come on, get your bargains here ladies, get them here, over you come!” The reverberating clamour swelled on all sides. The noisy traders stood and sat everywhere, sheltering from the sky with pieces of cardboard, blackened by the sun and haggard from their toil in the burning glare.

A few men could be seen sheltering in the shade of their Kamaz trucks, the backs of which spewed out heaps of ripe, heavy water melons. Among piles of raspberries that towered towards him, Dalgat’s drunken eyes made out a sign scribbled in pidgin Russian advertising “Sweat apricots.” Green hazel nuts lay alongside like torn paper wrappings. Apples, pears, orange persimmon and tomatoes rose in neat, soldierly formations, flanked by pods of peas, cherries, large, small and oblong bunches of green, violet and red grapes. And among this rich abundance there prowled a moustachioed tax collector who for some reason carried a long whip.

Against the masses of food leant pieces of paper with the biro-scrawled names of the villages they had come from, Gergebil, Botlikh, Akhty, while half-blind, flea-ridden kittens crawled under the stalls between crushed pomegranates and peaches. All around people thronged relentlessly, sweaty and exhausted, with dark agitated eyes, cautious old ladies with neat ponytails, weary girls in sparkling evening dresses and heels who lugged buckets of cucumbers, women in veils and young men in track suits.

“Get your greens here sonny, come on!” they urged Dalgat. “Parsley, coriander, dill, all fresh... Check out these potatoes, the very best, no worms, weigh some out for you?... Come, have a bit of this apricot ... Try these sweet apples, not at all tart!”

Ahead of him a young woman in a straw hat swayed on her feet, blocking his way.

“Nice hat miss, let me try it on,” shouted a woman selling carrots while immediately snatching and placing it on her unkempt head and doing a turn as her neighbours came up to help her tie the ribbons. The owner of the hat tried to reach for it in confusion, prompting a male trader with a kindly smile to spit out the straw he was chewing and call out from across the aisle: “Take your hat back yourself, lady, she’s got dirty hands, she’ll make it all grimy!”

Dalgat walked on and turned into the small meat hall stinking of blood but dark and cool. Long sides of veal, mutton and other meats hung from the ceiling while the men worked quickly and deftly on carcasses with axes.

“Here you go young man, the finest mutton just for you!”

“Chickens, get your chickens!”

In the fish section the latest catch flipped around on the floor, sucking last gasps of air through

bulbous lips. A man in a dirty blue apron thumped the head of one large fish on the counter, while women in the row were busy gutting and filleting, surrounded by gleaming scales.

Dalgat remembered the religious programmes they used to show on television every evening, hosted by an uneducated, incoherent *alim* with some spiritual rank or other. By comparison, the young *mufti* on the show was smart and educated, but he then got murdered. In these programmes they would talk about genies and *suras*, prescribing what you can and can't do. People would ring into the studio, like the guy who asked if it was allowed to sleep with your back to the Koran. One girl even inquired what colour you should paint your nails according to Shariah law.

"Hello Dalgat, what's up?" came a voice, an old classmate who stood before him, his broad smile accentuating the old rip in his ear.

"Ah, Maga, how you doing?"

"Great – got your phone on you?"

"Yes," Dalgat answered, reaching into his pocket.

"I haven't got any money right now and I have to call the boys, one of the junkies has started to mess us around. I stood talking to him and he started playing up, so I suddenly gave him a smack, that shook him, but then wham-bam, suddenly he was on me. I threw him off and gave him a good beating, messed him up real good. Now he's gone to get his boys, so I have to gather our lot."

As he talked to Dalgat, Maga took his phone, said something about the model and its power and suddenly yelled into the handset.

"Hey, Murad, it's Maga, what's up! How are your dad and mum, brother and sister? I'm calling about that son of a bitch Isashka's brother. He wants to take us on! Where are you now? Get over to Street 26, let's roll the lot of them, show him who's boss. Give your brother a call, and Shapiska too, get them over. Okay, thanks buddy, talk to you later."

Maga ended the call and started to fiddle about on the buttons.

"You got any girls on here?" he asked Dalgat.

"No, it's a new phone," he replied.

Maga looked at Dalgat closely, exposing rows of healthy teeth in a big grin.

"What's the matter with you, you're getting weedy? Don't you work out no more?" he teased, playfully prodding Dalgat in the shoulder and back. "Come for a spin with me, the boss gave me his car for a while, let's zip round and see the lads and then take a ride along Lenin Street and back."

"I've got to get to a place around here, drop me off?" Dalgat asked as he followed Maga to a new foreign car.

"No problem."

As they got in they were suddenly surrounded by a bunch of Uzbek dervish beggars who had been sitting on the pavement eating chunks of watermelon.

"Sadahah! Spare some change," whined some swarthy urchins, holding their filthy hands through the windows into the car.

"Yo!" Maga yelled to an Uzbek woman standing back from the kids, "Get them away!"

"Sadahah! Spare some change, in the name of Allah," the woman bleated back as she looked up from her watermelon.

"You're richer than me anyway!" Maga shouted back, and turning to Dalgat told him: "These beggars make a killing here, she won't even look at bread, all she wants is money!"

As if she had heard him, the Uzbek got up and held out her hand: "Give me bread, we'll eat it, Allah punishes thieves but we are not thieves."

Maga was deaf to them as he stepped on the accelerator, whipping the car forward through the unruly flow of vehicles, oblivious to the traffic lights ahead. He quickly reached the turn, screeched off to the left and veered into the opposite lane, ignoring the whistle of a traffic cop standing by the road.

"That whistle was for us," ventured Dalgat, gripping his seat.

"So what, the boss will have the lot of them," Maga shot back, maintaining his speed while rifling through a pile of CD's with one hand and then filling the street with the sound of a female Avar singer.

"Ah, Lazat," Maga exclaimed appreciatively, beaming at Dalgat. Suddenly the car stopped with a

squeal of tires and winding down the window, Maga shouted over the music.

“Give you a lift somewhere girls?”

A group of attractive girls in glitzy clothes and shiny shoes and with neat hairdos made their way slowly along the roadside, not stopping.

“Hey, are you deaf or something, hold up!” Maga yelled.

“You’re not going our way,” one girl replied, haughtily adjusting her hair but laughing.

“Let’s go Maga,” said Dalgat, remembering his task.

“See you later girls,” Maga promised and gunned the engine again. “Once I was driving with Nurik and there were these two chicks walking along by the Anzhi bazaar,” he then told Dalgat, turning the singer down a little as he spoke. “We crawled along behind them for a while, then one said to the other, these guys are okay, let’s get a ride with them.”

“Then what?” asked Dalgat.

“We drove them to Manas, where there’s a nice sandy beach, and invited them to take a swim. Then they started to make trouble, Nurik grabbed one and she started to create. He shouts at her ‘you speak properly to me’ and the like, and she screams back that she’ll get her brother, it was dead funny!”

“So what happened?”

“Well, we got down to it in the end. Nurik’s was a right little cow but mine was a bit of all right. At first she wasn’t up for it but then she lightened up. I recognized one of them from Idris’s yard – now the lads there don’t leave her alone,” laughed Maga. “Shall we get you something to smoke?”

“No thanks – you can stop here,” Dalgat replied, and then they both got out of the car at the mouth of a cul de sac.

“Okay pal, mind how you go,” Maga called after him, frowning as Dalgat went to go.

Sensing he had not done right, Dalgat paused and extended his hand. Maga shook it and half joking, half seriously, dropped Dalgat onto his back in the road.

“Got no strength these days have you, eh? You know the form, Dagestan boys are strong!” he said, brightening again.

“He who isn’t with us is under our feet,” Dalgat replied with a grin as he got to his feet and shook himself off. “Thanks for the ride, take care!”

“OK, I’m off, stay in touch,” Maga shouted before the car shot off, hitting every pothole as it sped out of sight, leaving Dalgat alone with his ears still ringing from the blare of the stereo.

Now Maga had gone he tried to remember which of the tight rows of houses belonged to Khalilbek. Small clay-built dwellings adjoined larger, well-to-do properties, most of which were still under construction. The pavement was dotted with piles of sand, ballast and garbage, and children in ragged shorts and wearing triangular leather amulets around their necks ran around on the dirty street.

The area was populated by the Akhvakh (one of Dagestan’s numerous ethnic groups) and one gate even bore the proud sign “Akhvakh = strength.” By the gate stood a cluster of women in cheap headscarves and housecoats who inspected Dalgat from top to bottom and called out: “Who are you looking for?”

“Khalilbek’s house.”

“You see that corner? Go straight through there and you’ll find a red-brick house, that’s them, they’re in now.”

He strode a few steps to the corner and saw a gang of five or six rough-looking youths squatting by the roadside, all aimlessly spitting on the ground at their feet. Noticing the skinny stranger approaching them the group perked up.

“Hey, no *salam* for us then?” a ginger-haired youth in black shorts called out to Dalgat.

“Assalam aleikum,” Dalgat said, approaching and holding out his hand as nonchalantly as he could.

“How about giving me a go on our phone?” ginger asked, slapping Dalgat’s palm in greeting but not getting up.

“No phone I’m afraid, it’s being repaired.”

"I bet you anything he's got one," said another of the pack, pulling a handful of sunflower seeds from his pocket and squinting lazily at the sky.

"Hey, what do you think you're up to monkey boy, I said give me your phone!" the first added, hackles rising.

"No way," Dalgat said firmly, resolving to brazen this out. "Want me to call my buddy over here do you?"

"I'll take care of your buddy too," hissed ginger, losing his composure. "What's your problem, eh?"

"No problem," Dalgat managed.

"Hey, Ibrashka, tell him," ginger said to one of the others, now evidently close to boiling point.

"Don't start anything here if you're smart," said Ibrashka, standing up menacingly and swinging a rubber shoe on his bare foot. "What's your game, pal?" he added, suddenly grabbing Dalgat's wrists.

"You going to take him Ibrashka or what?" another asked.

"I'm going to kick his face in, that's what I'm going to do," spat Ibrashka, throwing Dalgat from left to right by his wrists.

No one had struck him yet but they pressed in from all sides, hampering each other in the process. Ginger was the most determined to get in close to him.

"What are you showing off for then, eh?" he hissed, jabbing him in the forehead with a big paw.

Behind them they heard a boyish shout of "fight!" and Dalgat saw a crowd of kids run out of the adjoining streets to watch. Someone rushed forward to separate him and ginger, and when Dalgat dropped the leather folder he was carrying another kid stamped on it with a trainer. A little guy in a tracksuit with a self-important expression tried once again to separate them until ginger elbowed him in the nose, only to receive an unexpected blow to the ribs in retaliation. Then amid the noisy melee someone shouted "Cool it boys, that's the White Khadzhik's cousin!"

Dalgat felt the crush slacken slightly and then saw Khalilbek's son Khadzhik and two of his friends, one of whom was making a show of talking into an expensive mobile phone. Khadzhik himself was muscle-bound and fashionably dressed, his fair hair falling down the nape of his neck and with a pair of pointy shoes decorated with a chain shining on his feet.

"What do you think you're doing hassling my cousin, eh, are you stupid or what?" he barked at the crowd.

"It was Rusik who started on him," someone shouted angrily in a high-pitched voice.

"What do you mean me," ginger protested, hitching up his shorts. "I didn't say anything out of order to him. I just asked to use his phone and he starts to get het up and then scared. Act normally and nothing will happen to you, got it?" he said to Dalgat, throwing his thick arm around him as if to show they were now friends.

Dalgat broke away from the embrace and picked up his dusty folder with its fresh covering of footprints.

"What are you getting all offended for now, moron?" ginger snapped.

"What did you say?" scowled Khadzhik, feeling for something tucked in his pocket.

"Me, nothing..." ginger mumbled.

"Any more lip from you and I'll open you up good and proper," growled Khadzhik, drawing his hand back from his pocket and leading Dalgat to some black gates behind which a red-bricked house was visible.

"So did that little punk get the better of you?" Khadzhik asked. "Don't have anything to do with him, that Rusik is a shithead."

"Are you leaving now?" Dalgat asked.

"I'm off for a ride with the boys in town, you come in though, Arip is home. Give me a call if you need me, and I'll drop you off wherever you want later."

"Thanks," said Dalgat, shaking Khadzhik's hand as he left.

"Any problems, let me know," said Khadzhik as he went to join his friends, issuing a word of warning to the gang on the road as they dissipated. The three of them got in a foreign car and raced off round the corner in a pall of dust that lingered behind them.

Dalgat quickly went through the gates and found himself in a small inner yard with a fire-cock jutting from the ground and a moderately sized two-storied house. The second floor was unfinished and the yard stank of lime.

Aunt Naida came out of the house and hugged him.

“Wow, Dalgat! Where have you been? How come you’re so dishevelled? How’s your Mum? Come in, we’re going to have hinkalis.”

On the wall of the room, under the stucco ceiling, hung a rug with a woven portrait of the imam Shamil in a *papakha* sheepskin hat. Under it, on a sofa covered in decorative cushions, sat Khadzhik’s older brother Arip, a dark blue gold-embroidered skull-cap perched above his thick eyebrows.

“How did your T-shirt get all stretched like that?” he asked as he greeted Dalgat.

“Em, here, I had a bit of trouble by your house, Khadzhik gave me a hand.”

“Where has he gone off to this time?”

“For a ride in town he said.”

“He’ll ride straight to hell,” Arip snorted. “No matter how much I tell him not to go driving with these jackals he still goes and gets himself in a fix somewhere. Have you started praying yet, Dalgat?”

Dalgat sighed heavily.

“I told you before...” he started to say.

“You listen to me, I’ve been telling you all along to go and start praying on your own, haven’t you been paying attention?” Arip said, stooping down towards him.

“I...”

“You saw those little junkies by the gate? Khadzhik, as Allah willed it, doesn’t touch weed, because I’d batter him if he did. But those little punks take whatever they can get their hands on or just sit around, scrapping or running after girls half naked and bothering them. What is this world of unbelievers coming to? They’ve set up clubs here, discos, and just look at the state of the women on the streets! What’s going on? If we had Shariah law there would be none of this contamination here, agreed?”

“There’s no point in discussing this with you, Arip,” Dalgat said, sighing once again.

“It’s my duty to instruct you. ‘He who brings to fulfilment will be rewarded, he who abandons will be punished’. We know from the *Hadith* that a person will plummet 70 years to the bottom of Hell for but one wrong word, so who’s to say what punishment a wrong deed will incur?”

“I don’t believe in the tales of the Prophet,” replied Dalgat.

“Do you know the story about that guy who was a Communist but then became a believer? He began to pray diligently, then everyone used to get him to sing *mawlid*s on Mohammad’s birthday, which he was pretty good at. Then one day someone tells him their relative died and he should come to Buinaksk to sing *mawlid* prayers for them. But some other people in Derbent told him their son had been circumcised and that he should go there to sing for them. And you know what, he appeared both in Buinaksk and Derbent at the same time.”

“How do they know that?”

“How do they know that? They phoned each other: Salam – Salam. One person says Nadyr is reading the *zikr* for us here in Buinaksk, while the other says ‘no he’s here with us in Derbent’ – it’s all true I swear,” said Arip. “And do you know about Allah and the tomatoes?”

“No.”

Arip got out his mobile and, clicking some buttons, showed Dalgat a close-up of a tomato without a skin, the white veins on its flesh twisted and bent like Arabic script.

“See, it says ‘Allah’,” Arip crowed. “This tomato was grown by godly people.”

“Photoshop,” Dalgat countered.

“What Photoshop,” Arip snapped in sudden exasperation. “I’m telling you, these are real tomatoes! And do you know about the man who heard the prayer?”

Dalgat batted his hand in dismissal.

“No, listen, we all know that every living thing from animals to plants, gives praise every day to the Almighty, and this person, a guy from my village, began to hear how the animals and plants say ‘One God.’ He couldn’t sleep or eat and went to seek advice in Chirkei from Sheikh Said Apandi, who told him that his was a great gift. But the man had real trouble living with this gift and he asked

Apandi to free him of it. There is so much proof you know. Take that American astronaut who was in space, he heard the call to prayer there. Everyone knows that!”

“Arip, fools tell you stuff and you believe them...”

“Do you know Kamil from Izberg?” Arip interrupted.

“Yes I do, what of it?”

“Now that guy truly is a fool. It’s because of people like him that others hate Islam. He speaks of jihad but he’s got it all wrong. He even used ICQ to send me the mufti’s fetwa, imagine! So I say to him, what are you playing at, Kamil, someone has been messing with your head, you must adopt the true path – think of your poor mother! But he didn’t listen to anyone and joined the rebels in the woods. All the wordly sins, he says, saunas with girls, bribes, this and that, came from Russia, and there must be Shariah law and infidels must be put to the sword.”

“Do you think that too?” Dalgat asked.

“They are right about Shariah, but we still have to be with Russia. All this *haram* emanates from our own leadership here. We have to change them – one ethnic group grabs the power and starts fleecing the others. And if we behead people for taking bribes, no one would do it.”

“How about you teach those hardcore believers some morals first,” said Dalgat. “Are they supposed to be better than me because they pray five times a day and then buy lots of goods to bring back with them when they go on the Haj?”

“Don’t judge everyone by their example! If some hypocrites pray five times a day and then go filling their pockets and robbing, it doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t pray five times a day. Go and see the Sheikh, he’ll explain everything to you.”

“Did you send Kamil to see the Sheikh?”

“Kamil’s gone, no saving him now. He didn’t read anything about Islam, and knew nothing about it, just called everyone infidels. His whole family was penniless, they went round the whole neighbourhood to collect money for a bribe to get his sister to college. And so he started to fall in with the Wahabites, and they aren’t true holy warriors, their Islam is wrong. You don’t get into Paradise by killing innocent people, but they lead lads like Kamil to their deaths. It’s America that gives them money so they kill our boys and wage war against Russia. They reject the sheikhs, our teachers, the holy places, and *mawlid* celebrations, everything. All they want is to use other people to mete out death.”

“As long as they don’t send troops here too...,” said Dalgat.

“You don’t say. And it’ll only get worse!” Arip exclaimed. “Mark my words, there will be a total mess here, God only knows how bad it will get. Once I got a call from Osman, asked me to go to the bazaar at Batirai. I couldn’t make it because of the traffic so I asked him what was going on. Osman said there was a security operation, they didn’t take anyone alive, just carried out the bodies in front of everyone, and there’s a big jam of cars and people everywhere, sheer chaos. The bodies of the rebels were just lying on the street. One Wahabite was still alive so the Black Berets finished him off with a rifle, just like the others got it inside. Then they started to break up the crowd, roughing people up, beating on the cars, Osman still has a big dent in his bonnet. What sort of lawlessness is this, eh? They might have left one of the Wahabites alive, I mean, don’t they need information? And couldn’t they have kept people away earlier? We are finished if we give these Black Berets free rein, I’m telling you!”

“Our police aren’t any better,” Dalgat started to say.

“Take our neighbour, Djamaludin, 90 years old, had that operation in hospital. His grandson Musa is a well brought up boy, always carried our mum’s bag at the bazaar. Then one day he gets a visit from people wearing masks, they search his house and when he asks what for they tell him nothing, and no warrant either. Then they left, taking Musa with him. The family’s passports all vanished in the raid, money went missing, including the old man’s, and they wouldn’t release Musa from custody. His dad went to the police station where the district commander swore by God his men wouldn’t harm his son and that he should leave. He was lying, they beat Musa for several nights in a row, asphyxiated and electrocuted him, pulled his teeth out, forced him to sign a confession that he was a Wahabite. They didn’t let a lawyer see him, then three guys from the special forces came for him, took him out to the highway and they too beat and abused him so badly his own father

couldn't recognize him. For two weeks these animals kept him lying injured in a cell. Dalgat, tell me, how are we supposed to let them get away with something like that?

Dalgat sat in despondent silence.

Aunt Naida carried in a dish of plump Avar dumplings, pieces of dried meat, cream cheese with garlic, flax seed butter and spicy *adjika* sauce. She then plumped down in an armchair covered with a coloured drape and fished out the TV handset from beneath her.

"Can I switch on the television, Arip?" she asked.

"Of course, no need to ask," he answered, before reciting the *bismillah* grace. Dalgat realised how hungry he was and set about dipping his dumplings in the sauce, while Aunt Naida fiddled with the worn buttons on the remote. Eventually she found a Dagestani music video in which a rising star of the local pop scene swayed her hips and sang about her beloved walking through Makhachkala's beautiful streets.

"Turn it over," said Arip, gnawing on a piece of meat.

The singer disappeared and was replaced by the mayor and the pinched faces of some local officials as one of them received a dressing down for the latest breakdowns in the power and water supply. The officials practically cowered before the mayor as another of their number was taken to task over the garbage cans that burned around the city.

"Has your house got water at the moment, Dalgat?" Aunt Naida asked.

"I don't know, I haven't been home for a while."

"We went without for a whole month, and then only the hot came on – Sokhrab would bring us canisters of cold water from his place."

"Will Uncle Khalilbek be long?" Dalgat asked. "I need to give him this folder."

"You'd better give it to him yourself," she answered. "He should be in the Republican Library now, I gather they are launching some book there."

Loud music suddenly blared out in the yard and Aunt Naida exclaimed "Khadzhik."

"Me indeed," came Khadzhik's voice through the doorway.

"Come and eat!"

Khadzhik entered the room cheerfully and shadow boxed for a moment.

"What are you all down in the dumps about then?" he said, still hopping about.

"Come on, I want a quick word with you," said Arip, wiping his overgrown chin and leaving the room with his brother.

"Have a quick bite to eat, Khadzhik, then you can give Dalgat a lift," Aunt Naida called after him, and then turned and asked Dalgat with a smile: "Did you see the video of Magomed's son's wedding?"

"No," Dalgat replied sleepily.

"I'll show you a bit now before you go," said Naida, pushing a cassette into the player.

Some familiar figures of adults and children appeared dancing on the screen. Aunt Naida pressed pause and turned to Dalgat.

"Who's that," he asked.

"It's Madina, the daughter of your Uncle Abdullah, she's studying medicine. Do you think she's pretty?"

Stood motionless on the screen, her arms lifted in the air and her hair neatly styled, was a girl in a strapless evening dress.

"Leave it out, Aunt Naida," Dalgat said irritably. "I don't like her."

"Why not? Look what a beauty she is, and she's good around the house too."

Dalgat got up from the sofa and made for the door.

"Think about it," she said as he left. "They've nearly finished building their house now and they've got a plot in the mountains..."

In the hall Khadzhik was putting on his shiny shoes.

"I dropped my phone, during the scuffle I guess," Dalgat said.

"Don't panic, I'll have a word with them later and shake it out of them."

"Take care, Dalgat," Aunt Naida called after him. "It's Zalbeg's wedding today, maybe we'll see you there."

Arip gave him a firm handshake as he left and said, “Don’t sit around son, think about the Almighty, and have this as well,” handing him a slim book on how to offer prayer.

Dalgat promised to read it, slipped it inside the folder and followed Khadzhik out of the house.

It was windy outside now. As they drove Dalgat looked through the window at the boxes and wrappers that flew around the dirty town, and at women who were dressed like tarts and battled to hold down their skirts and hair in the swell on the streets. Khadzhik looked at them too and laughed.

“Get a load of that!”

Khadzhik got out of the car a few times on the way to greet people he knew crowded on the pavement or cutting capers with their cars as on horseback.

“Nice little runner, isn’t it? Ten minutes in her and I’ll catch up with anyone you like. At night it’s sheer fun, me and the boys just cruise around all over, at any speed on any street.”

“Are the traffic lights broken then?” Dalgat asked.

“Forget the lights, there aren’t any cops on the streets now anyway.”

“Where are they all then?”

“Sitting at home, afraid of snipers. You can do what you want. Then again, there’s not much petty crime here anyway.”

“Are you working anywhere these days?” Dalgat asked, watching a small Arab prayer charm bounce about beneath the rear-view mirror.

“There’s nothing about now, the boss promised to get me a job in the prosecutor’s office, he’s got a friend there. Do you know how much it costs to get into the traffic police now as a beat officer?” Khadzhik asked unexpectedly.

“No.”

“250,000 roubles, even though the cops tend to get killed a lot now.”

Khadzhik did a kind of feint manoeuvre and then mounted the pavement and stopped, almost hitting a public transport minibus whose driver swore back at him. A car full of young men zipped past them at full speed, the occupants laughing and leaning out of the windows holding the roof as they drove, including the guy at the wheel.

“See you later boys!” Khadzhik yelled after them.

Dalgat tried to stay in the shade as he walked, but there was hardly any shade to be had. Some heavily dolled up women were gathered in the road, blocking his way. Skirting round them he ducked round the corner where there was a crowd of middle-aged men and a large, ample woman in a silk shawl, hands on her hips during the customary conspiratorial haggling over the price. One of the men grinned in embarrassment at some girls who gaped at the spectacle as they passed, and urged, “Keep moving girls, there’s nothing for you here.” Dalgat’s heart missed a beat when he saw the crowd and the place where he once stood and haggled before spending two hours with a shameless wench with high cheekbones.

On a long fence, behind which the construction of the sports complex dragged out for years on end, someone had written in charcoal “Sister fear Allah – wear hidjab.” Further on, between the bright posters advertising concerts and beauty salons, more graffiti exhorted “Dagestan, defend the religion of Allah in word and deed!”, and finally, “Death to the enemies of Islam! God is great!”

He was then almost deafened by the roar of traffic at a large crossroads where idle policemen usually loafed around with rifles, chewing on sunflower seeds and hassling local beauties as they passed. From the jeep, which shook to a cacophony of Dagestani pop, a pair of bare feet stuck out and some fingers that clicked to the music. Along the roadsides old ladies dozed with sacks of seeds at their feet, while voices floated overhead from adjacent yards where a sea of bed sheets dried on lines.

The houses encroached on the road, vying to consume the pavement with its heaps of garbage. The fences of some properties actually ran on the footpath, another had swallowed a tree and an electricity transformer block from the public land. One owner had even used a tiny square of land to build a five-storey house that jutted overhead. As if forgetting they were built on even ground rather than the mountains, the houses had leant together, and all around the apartment blocks had sprouted huge extensions and glassed balconies, while private sun-baked smallholdings were

invariably surrounded by high walls made of fashionable yellow bricks.

Dalgat turned towards the little side streets and Jewish quarters clustered around the port and the Anzhi-Akra Hill with its small beacon on the crest. He could already hear the sound of the *lesghinka* dance and saw the 'Halal' sign above the banqueting hall and its open garret with figures moving busily inside. In its yard a mass of children played beside 20 or 30 parked cars festooned with garlands of flowers. The bride had evidently just arrived because as Dalgat went up the stairs he saw a sweaty *zurna* piper and drummer being plied with mineral water after their greeting performance. The hall was set for 3,000 guests and was already packed with people, most of whom he knew or had seen somewhere. A happy, portly relative ran up to Dalgat and threw his arms round him.

"Salam aleikum, Dalgat! Look, Israpil, this is Akhmed's son, don't you remember him? You're so like your father. Wah!" he exclaimed, introducing Dalgat to the men around them. Most recognized him and clapped his palm to shake it in greeting.

As he made his way through the throng, Dalgat found himself trapped between some women in aprons with oily hands. They asked him about his mother, who he said was now away in Kizlyar, and led him to some old women in long, light-coloured shawls who were sat in line behind the heavily loaded tables. The kisses and hugs began. Dalgat let them kiss his hand; his answers were irrelevant because no one could hear any questions or answers anyway over the thundering music.

After he managed to get away he remembered he had to make his contribution to the wedding; two women sat with a calculator at a table by the entrance and jotted down who had given how much. Dalgat went up to them and made his hello audible before turning over most the money he had in his pockets.

"Salam, Dalgat, what are you standing around here for, get a move on!" shouted a young male relative who appeared at his side and then led him past countless tables into the heart of the event.

There was a tumult of wild dancing in front of the newlyweds' table, behind which hung a red rug with the names "Kamal and Amina" shaped with cotton wool. In the middle of a tight circle the bride moved slowly and clumsily in a flared skirt, her heavily made-up face drooped in embarrassment over her plunging neckline. Ritually edging the groom away from her, his friends pranced around like goats for her attention, one leaping into the air and throwing his shoulders out proudly before another muscled in to cavort on the spot before her. Then a third man seized from his hands a white stick clad in chiffon frills, thundered with his heels and twirled his arms around the bride, locking them momentarily around her waist and then trailing them over her head while showering her with scrunched up banknotes. The infectious music almost got Dalgat dancing too, but instead he plunged into the thick of the crowd and stood clapping.

The bride continued to lazily cross-step her feet in time to the music, fanning herself and holding down her crinoline skirt while the young men tirelessly competed with dancing leaps and cartwheels, to the accompanying cries of '*assa!*' The young women looking on were all smartly dressed and groomed, glistening with various decorations and gems. As the chiffon-covered stick flashed from one set of manly hands to the next, a skinny woman stepped up to collect the bills that fell on the bride's head, landed in the folds of her dress or tumbled to her feet.

After a couple more minutes the bride finally tired of her laboured dance and set off just as slowly back to her seat together with her girlfriends, who straightened her outfit as she moved. As he watched the tall, smiling groom follow her Dalgat remembered how as a child he had attended a wedding in his old village. All of the neighbours sat up on the flat roofs of the houses and down on the street someone placed a brightly decorated goat's head on the happy couple's table. The guests were served heavy trays of hinkali dumplings and boiled meat, while some mummer poured wine for seven whole days as the guests celebrated to the sound of the *zurna* and drums.

As Dalgat mused, the circle separated into separate pairs of dancers. A girl touched his elbow and offered him a twisted serviette as an invitation. Dalgat recoiled and was about to decline, but not wishing to embarrass the girl took the serviette and raised his fists in the air in acceptance.

After managing three circuits with the nimble girl he felt awkward about his amateurish movements and stopped, bowed his head and applauding his partner to acknowledge the end of the dance. The girl gave him a surprised look and walked away, while Dalgat quickly crumpled the serviette and stuffed it into his pocket, lest anyone else want to dance with him.

“Salam, have you seen Khalilbek?” he asked a deadpan guy in a felt hat who passed him.

The man looked at Dalgat in interest and asked “Whose son are you?”

“Son of Akhmed the son of Musa,” Dalgat replied.

The man suddenly looked animated and led Dalgat behind him.

“Come and sit with us,” he shouted over the roar of the *lezghinka*. They took places at a table laden with *golubtsy* stuffed cabbage leaves, and hot meat dishes heaped with Dagestani *chudu* cream cheese and potato-filled pastries, greens and other morsels. A circle of guests drinking vodka poured a measure for Dalgat.

“So, tell us, how long will this carry on?” a burly, gloomy looking man at the table asked, motioning at the heaving mass around them.

“What was that?” shouted Dalgat, leaning towards him to hear better.

“This nonsense!”

The music broke off for a moment and in the ensuing silence the man’s words rang sharply. Dalgat said nothing in reply and silently served himself some *chudu* and aubergines. There was a murmur from the huge loudspeakers at the wall and then an accented, unsure sounding voice spoke up hoarsely.

“And now, dear friends, relatives and guests, I give the floor to a very fine and respected man who... er... has achieved so much in his life, knows no bounds when caring for family and helps them in everything they do. And today, as the hearts of our dear Kamal and Amina are united, he will say some... er... parting words to them. Listen closely Kamal, you’ll get a chance to speak later, after dear Aidemir advises you how to proceed in your future family life. So Aidemir, what do you want to tell us...?”

“You’re at a loss for words yourself, aren’t you?” the burly man said to Dalgat, ignoring the faltering utterances of the *tamada* master of ceremonies.

“No I’m not,” said Dalgat, impaling a greasy *chudu* on his fork.

“This is a mess, just a mess,” the man said, shaking his head as the voice of Aidemir issued from the loudspeakers.

“Today we see united the hearts of representatives of two peoples, two great peoples of Dagestan, the Avars and the Lakhs,” said the voice, laden with a mix of inspiration and pathos. “We are overjoyed that our Kamal, who I remember when he was knee-high, has grown into such a horseman, an eagle of a man, and that he has wed this most beautiful girl Amina from the village of Tsovkra, so celebrated for its tightrope walkers. I wish Kamal that his life with her will be much easier than treading a tightrope, so let’s drink to this new family! May Kamal and Amina have ten children and that all are a joy to their parents!”

Aidemir had evidently raised his glass as all the men now stood up. Dalgat also sipped at his vodka for appearance’s sake, and once they were seated again the burly man turned to him once more.

“Those Lakhs are good folk, but the Dargins are devils, two a penny they are,” he pronounced.

“Why’s that?” Dalgat asked.

“What do you mean why’s that? Everyone knows it’s true, they’re nothing but a bunch of shopkeepers,” his neighbour said passionately. “Let’s drink.”

“Hey, you lay off the Dargins, Saipudin,” said the guy in the felt hat. “Our people do their share of business too, Akhmed’s son will agree with me on that.”

But Saipudin merely downed his vodka in silence and turned again to Dalgat.

“My whole life I worked with my hands,” he lamented. “And everything gets spent somehow, this much goes to so and so, I have to give the teacher something at school, cough up for the college exams. I’ve got a house that I can’t finish, I’ve been building it for twenty years but now I’m supposed to find the money to fix my son up with a job. I even told the wife that she must sell her gold necklace. He’ll want to marry then, but how are we supposed to pay for a wedding? I’ll have to steal.”

“Steal what?” asked Dalgat.

“A bride for him!” Saipudin exclaimed. “Then there’s no need to throw a banquet, just do the marriage ceremony and that’s all.”

“No, it’s bad to steal a bride, that’s what the Chechens do, not us,” interrupted a grey-haired man sitting opposite them who despite the heat wore a tall Astrakhan fur hat.

“Wah, Dalgat, why are you sitting here, we’re going dancing?” said a second cousin of his who suddenly leant over his shoulder, all wise-eyed and white toothed.

“Hello, Malik, I’m coming,” Dalgat said in relief, springing from his chair.

“Wait, I knew your father,” Saipudin said, rising unsteadily to his feet and swaying for a moment before he threw himself at Dalgat in an embrace, and thumped his puny back.

“Here, have this,” he said, taking a crumpled note from his pocket and holding it out. “Allah didn’t give me much money, but still I give to everyone.”

Dalgat carefully distanced himself from Saipudin and the banknote.

“I have money, thanks, give it to your son instead,” he said, looking round at Malik.

“Don’t you dare offend me!” Saipudin exclaimed and, egged on by the presence of his friends, thrust the note in the pocket of Dalgat’s jeans. Startled, Dalgat tried to return the money but Malik grabbed him by the shoulders and led him away.

“Forget these people, we’re going to kidnap the groom now,” he said gleefully as they moved into the melee.

From behind the long table some girls watched them with curiosity.

“Who’s that, Dalgat grandson of Musa?” Zalina drawled to her friends.

“That’s Dalgat,” Asya replied, laughing.

“Heavens, he’s so thin!” Zalina added.

Asya laughed again.

“They haven’t fed him for five years, honestly!”

They were joined by a large girl in a tight golden skirt with a heavily made-up face and a tinted fringe.

“I’m so thirsty in this heat, I’m going to drown myself in mineral water now,” she puffed, filling her glass.

“Patya, where did you get your skirt?” Zalina asked, inspecting her friend from top to bottom.

“From a boutique in Moscow. It’s Gucci,” Patya replied self-importantly, gulping her water and blowing air up at her fringe.

“It’s lovely – is it really Gucci from Moscow?” Zalina added, emphasising the last words.

A middle-aged man appeared behind Patya and offered her a sprig of flower buds. The girl heaved a sigh, then slowly straightened her skirt and hair, rose rather inelegantly from the table and followed him.

“Just look at her,” Zalina said to Asya. “Did you see how she went after him?”

“You don’t say... And her skirt is daft. She bought it at the Eastern Bazaar, I’m telling you, so she can cut the Gucci nonsense,” said Asya, watching in amusement as Patya circled the man’s galloping dance steps, lazily twirling her hands around him. “Did you know her fiancée called off the engagement?”

“Get away, Datsi called it off?!” said Zalina, lighting up with interest. “They’d already booked a bridal room at the Marakesh and Patya even had a tattoo done and what not!”

“Datsi saw her at the Pyramid discotheque and told her it was all off. She had to return all the presents, including all the dowry stuff his parents gave her in the suitcase.”

“It was probably a poor haul anyway, all from the village,” Zalina scoffed.

“You’re joking, there was a fur coat, clothes, boots and a fancy mobile phone – in fact there wasn’t a whole lot she didn’t get. And now look what a spectacle she’s making of herself, why did she even bother to come here at all?”

“Zalina, look at Zainab!” Asya whispered loudly, pointing a claret-coloured fingernail toward the next table where a girl sat in a pretty *hijab* headscarf.

“She’s covered up,” said Zalina, looking sideways at Zainab’s Islamic garb.

“I knew she’d cover up after what happened.”

“What did happen?”

“Well, her family left her on her own with a girlfriend in the village one night and to cut a long story short, she went off into the mountains with some guys. Her cousin happened to come by and

knocked at the house, then raised the alarm. She came back the next morning and they took her to a doctor immediately to have him check her for signs of intercourse.”

“And...?”

“I don’t know. She wanted to get married but now she pretends she’s too pure for it.”

“I also want to cover up,” Zalina said earnestly.

“Is your brother forcing you?”

“No, it’s my choice, because what I do at the moment isn’t enough, even though I observe the *sawm* fast, say my *namaz* prayers, although maybe not always. But I don’t wear a headscarf. Have you heard what they’re saying in town?”

“What’s that?”

“That during Ramadan the rebels will kill every girl they see without a headscarf. They already killed two.”

“Stop making things up!” Asya retorted. “They even said on TV that people are deliberately sowing panic among the population. So it’s not true!”

“I’m still scared,” Zelina replied.

Suddenly Khadzhik emerged from the crush with a happy smile on his face and asked Zalina to dance. She beamed and got up, her long strapless dress sparkling. Asya looked first at Zalina and Khadzhik and then at Patya, who was already dancing at full pelt with the groom’s brother, then at an old woman who was twirled her hands in an ancient dance, and then the guest singer, a woman who was quite well known in the city. A young man got her up to dance and holding the microphone, she daintily wiggled her bottom in Persian style.

Malik and his friends managed to discretely kidnap the groom while the bride affected a playful look of dismay during this wedding ritual. But Dalgat continued to look for Khalilbek. The song finished and the *tamada* and some of the esteemed guests were already cosying up to the laughing singer and pawing her. Among them were Aidemir, Khalilbek and the groom’s father Zalbeg, and some important guest officials or other. Uncle Magomed clapped Dalgat on the shoulder.

“Invite Abdullah’s daughter Madina for a dance, there she is sitting down, see, next to my mother,” said Magomed, pointing at the neatly-coiffured girl Dalgat had seen frozen in mid-motion on the video tape. “Go on, when the music starts.”

Dalgat shied away.

“I need to talk to Khalilbek,” he told Magomed.

“You have your talk later, don’t muck me about, go and ask her when the music begins.”

The *tamada* took the microphone and resumed his faltering spiel: “Hello, anyone out there, right, so basically our groom has been stolen. Why is the bride sitting alone, eh? A group of us have already gone to look for him, and we will... er... sort out those friends of his who did this, that’s right, even you Khalilbek! I now give the floor to our esteemed Khalilbek, who found the time to attend the wedding of his close relative Zalbeg, who is marrying his son to pretty Amina from Tsovkra. And, without more ado, Khalilbek will say a few words, and share some of his wisdom...”

“Salam, Dalgat!” came a voice behind him and Dalgat turned to see his cousin Murad, unshaven and tired-looking. “Let’s go outside for a talk.”

“What happened?” Dalgat asked.

“I need your help.”

Dalgat looked reluctantly at the *tamada* and Khalilbek as he prepared to give a speech and then trailed behind Murad, who led him to the edge of the open garret. Below them the children were still running around the parked cars, men stood smoking and women in baggy garments carried wedding cakes across the yard.

“I’ve got a package rolled up inside a carpet, you can keep it a few days at your place while your mum’s away,” Murad told him.

“What package?” asked Dalgat, impatiently looking back towards the hall and its echoes of Khalilbek’s voice.

“It’s nothing but I can’t keep it at home,” said Murad, wiping his red eyes.

“Is it heavy, because I’m not going home right away, I have to talk to Khalilbek?”

“No, not now, I’ll bring it round to you in the evening, you just hide it at yours for a couple of

days. Your mum's in Kizlyar, isn't she?"

"OK, fine," Dalgat agreed, keen to end the conversation.

Suddenly Khalilbek's voice was interrupted by women's screams and the singer's music cut in momentarily. People standing on the street ran upstairs to investigate and Dalgat also raced up into the hall where he saw a sea of shocked faces, especially that of the shaken tamada as he held back Zalbeg from a crowd of men crouching over something on the floor. Someone shouted for an ambulance.

"What happened?" Dalgat asked the nearest guests, but they just clutched their heads.

"Wahi, wahi!" the old women shrieked, covering their mouths with scarves and looking fearfully at the melee.

"Someone shot Aidemir," said a shaggy-haired young man, his eyes bulging. "I swear someone shot him, I saw it with my own eyes. He was standing there and suddenly from out of nowhere got a bullet in the head!"

"The side of this hall is open, you could shoot from anywhere," said another voice. Someone led the bride in her billowing skirt from her table without letting her look around, while Saipudin blundered past Dalgat, spluttering as he went.

"God have mercy on us," simpered the girls as they poured out the hall in an ornately dressed crowd.

"Let's get out of here," Murad said suddenly appearing at Dalgat's side and dragging him out.

"Khalilbek..." Dalgat started to say.

"Khalilbek went to meet the police, he hasn't got time for you now."

"Was it an assassination?" the women on the stairs asked each other. "Aidemir works at the prosecutor's office."

"If he's hit in the head they'll not be able to save him," someone else added, while the old women just whispered "Wahi, wahi!" and fumbled with their beads.

"Now the police are here they'll search everybody," said Murad, "They'll say that because it was a wedding that someone just got carried away with their celebrating and fired at the ceiling and hit Aidemir by mistake. Everyone's got guns here, they always do, we'd better get out of here."

They were already walking along a dirty, stuffy alleyway when they heard a police siren wailing in the direction of the "Halal" banqueting hall.

"What happened, I don't get it?" Dalgat said. "I wanted to go closer and look at Aidemir."

"What do you want to look at that dog for," replied Murad, quite unbothered.

They went onto the city beach. Taking off their sandals the pair walked down the well-trodden sand to where noisy, happy clusters of people lay basking on sheets. Dalgat looked at the duck-shaped silhouette of a derelict factory on the island bobbing in the distance on the choppy grey waters of the Caspian Sea. In the foreground, bathers splashed in the mucky shallows. A group of old and young women waded into the sea in long clinging nightdresses, teenagers squealed as they scooped water at each other and two girls in bikinis squealed as someone grabbed their ankles. Children laughed and ran around shouting in unfathomable mountain dialects, chomping on corn on the cob handed to them by imposing mothers.

"Hot pies!" shouted a woman as she picked her way through the wet bodies around her. Dalgat saw a group of girls, one of whom wore a Muslim tunic and hijab, while her friend sported a cheap red bandana and long, semi-transparent skirt with slits down the side. Others wore fashionable knickerbockers. They were followed by a posse of boys who joked and gathering handfuls of little shells they tossed them playfully at the girls' backs or bottoms. Murad hung his head in silence as he walked, holding up his trousers as he went.

Some Chechens in wet, sand-covered slacks kicked a ball about noisily and, as usual, a group of heavily-built men and youths congregated around a metal chinning bar dug deep in the sand. Further on behind heaps of rocks they could see the cranes of the deep-sea port in the distance. Murad and Dalgat climbed up the rocks, past some Russian fishermen stood with aluminium buckets for their catch, and at last sat down right at the water's edge. Dalgat sighed.

"It's not good to refer to someone you don't know as a dog," he said.

Murad chuckled and dangled his hairy legs into the spray of the waves.

“Who doesn’t know him? He’s a thief. Do you see those big houses over there?” Murad asked, pointing. “He owned three of those.”

“Why are you speaking about him in the past tense, he’s still alive?” Dalgat mumbled.

“He’s a filthy turncoat, abandoned our faith and went and became like all the rest of the infidels and traitors with their ignorant ways,” Murad replied, spitting into a wave that rose beneath him. “It’s all down to *kufur*.”

“What’s that?” asked Dalgat.

Murad turned to Dalgat and scratched a stubbly cheek as he looked at him.

“Don’t you know what *kufur* is? It’s everywhere, everywhere! It’s lack of morals, refusal to believe in the miracles of Allah. Just now at the wedding Mala and Rashid were boasting about how they pray even more than five times a day, morons!”

“So what?”

“They say their prayers and then drink beer, it’s sacrilegious, it is. That Aidemir built two mosques but his son raped a dozen of our sisters, students and suchlike. He was also filming them with his mobile phone and emailed them around to his friends for fun.”

Murad fished a green tubeteika scull cap from his pocket and put it on his head.

“I’m coming over to yours this evening, don’t forget. There’s a lot that needs explaining to you. You live on your own with your mum, no one has much use for you, and no one will set you up with normal work because of all the infidel employment practices. You have to fight for things,” he instructed Dalgat. “You know how the Sufis have taken over almost everywhere? They account for the imams in almost all the mosques and sit on the Muslim councils, and they suck up to the Russian infidels and submit to them entirely. It’s wrong, the family of Muslims, the *umma*, shouldn’t be divided like this, otherwise there will be a *fitnah*, an uprising and split in Islam, understand? We Salafites, Wahabites if you like, believe that we must return to the true Islam they had in the time of the Prophet, peace be unto him, and that the Muslim Imamate should be independent.”

“Who’s been putting all this talk in your mouth?” Dalgat asked.

“None of your lip,” Murad snapped, rising to his feet and straightening his trousers. “I know you’re one of us at heart. By the way, I won’t be alone when I come to your place later. You might be a bit of an oddball, but I know you want justice. Have you got a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Good lad, not a fornicator then,” Murad said, smiling as he stood above Dalgat. “Our sisters are another story. Expect me around midnight, and make sure you’re at home.”

Murad nearly slipped on the wet rocks as he went off without shaking hands and vanished from view.

Dalgat got up to go and, passing the fishermen again, he jumped from the rocks onto the sand and back into the hubbub of the beach. There was no sign of Murad.

“Hey kid, want some?” a short man with a moustache in an unbuttoned shirt shouted at him as he rinsed a water melon.

“No thanks,” Dalgat smiled back.

“My treat,” the man shouted but Dalgat had ambled on, staring idly at a motor launch that had moored to take people on board until he reached the men heaving themselves up and down at the chinning-bar.

“How many pull-ups can you do then sonny?” someone asked, slapping Dalgat on the shoulder.

“Not today,” he replied. “I pulled a muscle so I can’t.”

This drew a burst of laughter from a couple of girls who had stepped out from the crowd to watch. Angered, Dalgat strode quickly to the taps and washed off his feet, put on his sandals and went into the archway over which goods trains periodically rumbled. Beneath it a young couple was enjoying a furtive embrace, while at the mouth on the other side a cross-legged beggar rocked from side to side, yowling a tortured melody.

There was still a throng of people around the banqueting hall.

“Khalilbek is in the police station on Soviet Street,” an agitated teenager with long eyelashes told him. It was close by and sure enough Khalilbek’s white car stood outside when Dalgat got there.

“This is the place,” he thought and then decided to wait outside and watch the crowd.

Trendy Muslim girls in lace stockings and velvet dresses tripped along the broken pavement on high-heels while older women fanned their busts as they walked along. Minibus drivers jumped out of their vehicles to greet each other loudly and shake hands on the busy street, which bristled with the signs of beauty salons and dental surgeries.

“Hi Dalgat!” came the voice of Mesedu, one of his classmates.

“Have you had your hair cut?” Dalgat asked as he turned to her.

“Yes, don’t you think a square cut suits me best?” she asked coquettishly. “Let’s go into a café and sit down for a while, I haven’t seen you for ages.”

“I’m waiting for somebody, he might get here any moment.”

“You’re not getting away that easily, give him a call,” she said.

“My phone got stolen.”

“So use mine,” Mesedu replied, leading Dalgat to a fashionable glass-door café called “Maryasha.” By the door hung a framed sign: “No sportswear or weapons.”

It was cool in the café and little fountains gurgled beneath large screens showing music videos.

“Let’s sit in a booth,” Mesedu commanded.

Once they were settled she took some cigarettes from her bag.

“Well just look at you smoking now,” Dalgat said.

“Don’t make me laugh, Dalgat,” she trilled back, clicking her lighter. “Almost all of us smoke in secret while pretending to be nuns. Haven’t you noticed how the girls shut themselves into the booths?”

A waitress with pencilled eyebrows and rosy cheeks came up.

“Lamb kebab and a litre of apricot juice,” Mesedu told her. “And what will you have, Dalgat?”

“Nothing for me, I have to go soon.”

“What, are you fasting?” she joked.

“The fast is long over. So what are you up to now?”

“I’m moving to St. Pete to work in a translation bureau. My Dad is against the idea, of course, but what is there for me to do here?”

“Find a husband,” he suggested.

“No way, husband – are you crazy?” said Mesedu, arranging her hair and flicking her ash. “There’s no one to get married to here, unless you think I might go for you,” she said with a peal of boyish laughter. “I’ve heard there are lots of skinheads in St. Pete,” she continued, suddenly serious. “But I don’t think I’ll have any trouble, I look like a Russian.”

“You do in that outfit,” Dalgat answered, studying her linen jacket which was spangled with buttons.

“Do you like it? The girls here stare at me like I’m crazy. Hey, I saw Dima.”

“And?”

“He just finished his army service, asked to do it voluntarily, see a bit of the world. With his university degree he only had to do a year.

“Everybody just does a year now.”

“So it happened before they changed the rules,” Mesedu frowned back. “But generally they dislike the one-year guys more than anyone in the army. Anyway, he got sent to the Smolensk region and though they try not to send too many Dagestanis or any Caucasians to one unit, there were five others there.”

“But Dima’s Russian himself?”

“That’s what he says, ‘I’m a Russian but still they take me for a darkie,’” Mesedu said with a laugh. “Anyway, our boys sorted everyone out there, had the sergeants washing their feet and the officers tiptoeing around them. And our Dima was one of them. They didn’t have to clean toilets or sweep floors. Our boys saw one Lezghin with a broom and they stuck his head down the toilet!”

“I don’t understand why he would go into that wretched army of his own accord?”

“Well actually Dima says our boys want to go and even bribe their way in, because afterwards you can get a job in the police or somewhere like that. Anyway, he got summoned to the political officer who asks him ‘You’re a Russian, so why you’re behaving like a black-ass from the Caucasus?’”

“So what does Dima say?”

“Well, he’s happy to keep his nose clean but then his Dagi mates will give him a beating. So he tells the officer he has no problem observing regulations if his personal security is guaranteed. But that’s nothing they *can* guarantee. They stuck him in the glasshouse for a while with a guy from our Tsumadin village. Neither of them ate in there so they wouldn’t need to go to the toilet, they just peed in a bottle and passed it through the bars. On the third day Dima got in a fight with this guy and the officers watched them through the bars and bet on whether ‘black or white’ would win. Eventually Dima got sent to a disciplinary battalion or whatever they call it in the army. Everyone’s a wimp there, always afraid of someone else, one guy even tried to cut his wrists. Dima was surprised by the pathetic state of them all.”

“Stay here Mesedu, what do you need to go to St. Peter for? They all think we are thugs and savages.”

“And here everyone thinks Russian men are all drunks and weaklings and the women are whores, so what’s the difference – at the end of the day everyone hates everyone else?”

“I was just talking to one guy, he’s kind of a resistance fighter,” Dalgat confessed.

“You’re kidding?”

“He wants to come and see me at home, or invite me to his, I’m not sure.”

The rosy-cheeked waitress came in and went out again, leaving a plate of steaming kebab and a jug of cooled juice on the table.

“Don’t go, Dalgat!” Mesedu implored him, filling her glass. “Do you know what happened to my cousin Gimbat? He got to know some guys and went with them to a flat. And that was that, they started to talk about religion and how the republic is riddled with corruption and has gone to the dogs. Of course he agreed with them, said sure, things are indeed in a bad state, that something has to be done...”

“And what then?”

“Well it turned out that these Wahabites had connections in law enforcement and it was all being recorded on camera in order to blackmail him. They came to him later and said here’s a tape showing you in the company of extremists, so now choose, either we turn you in or you join us in the resistance.”

“Why do they need to go to such lengths?”

“That’s how they recruit. It’s to their advantage that things are in such turmoil here. Gimbat was lucky that our dad also worked in law enforcement. When he heard his son was being sucked in he went white as a sheet, spoke to whoever he needed to ensure it all worked out okay in the end. Gimbat was lucky, but what about all the rest? So don’t even think about hanging about with these people.”

“Maybe you misunderstood,” said Dalgat. “It doesn’t seem very believable.”

Mesedu laughed again.

“You’re so funny, Dalgat.”

“I have to go now, in case I miss this guy. It was good to see you. Enjoy your meal.”

“Hang on a moment, take a bit with you,” said Mesedu, separating some of the meat for him.

“No thanks, and pay with this,” Dalgat said, leaving Saipudin’s banknote. “Bye.”

It was already dusk as he emerged onto the street. He could see that Khalilbek’s car was no longer parked outside the police station. At that moment an officer with a big nose and a rifle over his shoulder poked his head out of the door and then disappeared from sight again.

Dalgat was upset to see the car gone.

“No money for the bus either,” he sighed to himself and then sloped off down the street, occasionally reacting to the wild honking of the drivers, loud laughter and the nearby sounds of the *lezghinka*. It was now completely dark. A few idlers sat crouched along the kerbsides, lit up in the gloom by the blue light of their mobile phone displays. Not a single streetlamp worked and the only real illumination came from the little shops which resounded to cheery voices inside. Some girls strolled towards him, clasping each other’s arms, high heels clicking off the pavement and drawing soft wolf whistles behind them.

Dalgat walked slowly, trying not to step in the pits in the road and on the various construction

materials that spilled out before him. Turning into the city's main drag he went straight to the central square of Makhachkala. It was unlit and deserted there too, and the great daisy-chained inscription on a wall that boasted "Best city in Russia" was lost in the dark. Dalgat went and sat on the marble steps to Lenin's monument, his back to the blue shadows of the pine trees beside the city hall, opened the folder and groped around for the message for Khalilbek. Then he threw his head back and gawped up at the stars as they vanished in the fog that swept in from Tarkitau. Suddenly he heard steps behind him and someone gently called his name.

Dalgat turned and could make out the figure of a man under one of the pines.

"Who's that?" he asked, thrusting the folder under his arm and standing up.

"Salam, Dalgat!" said the man, striding up to him confidently. At that moment he could hear drum music erupt on the next street and cries of 'Assa!' floated to his ears as someone danced.

Dalgat watched the approaching man, knowing that he had come for him.

Translated from the Russian by Nicholas Allen