

Salomat Vafo

## THE SWING

A strange ceremony was going on in this house. For this ceremony a sheep had been slain, a neighborhood mosque's clergyman had been invited, and all relatives and acquaintances had been informed. The courtyard had been swept and cleaned like a china dish; sheep's head, legs and lungs were boiling hard in a big pot and smelling tastily. Having baked bread and biscuit rolls, the busy women of the neighborhood just started baking crackly bread to go with the head-legs soup. All the children of the family, even Sayilkhon who lived far, had arrived. It was very quiet in the courtyard, like the morning after the burial of the dead, not a single tick-tock was heard in the yard. A strange ceremony was going on: everything had been prepared for a burial but there was no dead body in the house. Those in the house walked and talked in a low voice and quietly. As Sayilkhon had come, having crossed a thousand *chaqirim* by car, he sat dreaming, his thin body trembling just breathing and sighing. The soup was brought in the bowls; the vegetable salads were served on little plates, just how the guest liked them. Sayilkhon would stride here and there, moving the plates here and there with some trouble. The thirty-five year old Bekposhsha, head wrapped up in a large shawl, stared at him and said, "Damn it, don't drink today. Look at yourself. Drinking every day, you are almost falling down dead. You have lost your body and now look like a little boy". The guest leaned his thin body against the pillow and wiped his eyes. They were bright red, as if he had been suffering from sleeplessness for months.

"I might have caught a cold, my head is aching with a thundering noise in it, and I feel tired", he said.

His little brother, who had been sitting there still without taking off his sheepskin coat and fur hat, broke into the conversation.

"Come on. Drink up brother. You're funny, Poshsha, if brother doesn't drink one day, will he give up drinking completely? If he is telling the truth, his cold may pass away at once. Now, he must gather strength for tomorrow".

The guest became lively, stood up straight, and swiftly opened a shiny bottle with an attractive label. As he poured, the vodka made bubbling sounds in the little cups with pictures of cotton on them; he put the first cup before his brother.

"Take." It was unclear to whom he was offering it. Not looking at anybody he bottom-upped the cup and, grimacing, crunched a piece of salted cucumber.

"May the house of the man who made this vodka burn down. What will people say seeing you like this? If your brother came yesterday it would have been different", said Beskpossha, seething with fury.

"They'd say what? Damn your folk. If you are in need, would they give you two loaves of bread?", said Qodir, staring angrily at him.

A big dish, full of steaming heads and lungs, was put in front of the guests. The smell of the cooked meat filled the room.

"Brother, your sisters-in-law are treating you with respect like you were an imam, spreading up a cooked sheep's head", said Bekposhsha joining the conversation, and sitting helplessly at the edge of the low dinner table.

Drinking up, Sayilkhon became more relaxed and lively, then filled up the cups with vodka again. In his movements there was something like tenderness, a sign of a noble elevation.

However, as serving vodka had become a significant part of his life, he seemed to do it like a professional, masterfully.

“Damn it. Don’t liken me to imams, I’ve never liked them. One of them is Bekmat. He is always extending his hands to people, begging. Always he seemed to be thinking, What should I take home from the table? Why don’t you eat up yourselves?”

“Brother, do you still see the Turakhanovs?”, asked his little brother to divert him from an unpleasant topic in the conversation.

“I used to meet him a while ago, but now, where should I be seeing him?”, said the guest, putting a piece of meat wrapped in a piece of warm bread in his mouth. These days I go to work two or three times a week. At home I read, writ, do errands. I enjoy watching TV, bundled up in my robe”, he said, slurping up the soup. Suddenly, he remembered his TV was broken, his house rent had not been paid, he had been sick and tired of the cockroaches in his apartment, and that the clicking and “tick-ticking” of the water from the old, rusty pipes had been getting on his nerves. He recalled again and again that in his childhood he had slept alone and suffered from sleeplessness, that he slept with his mother under the bed curtains during summer nights, and wept. When they met his mother she used to say, “my son, my sunny”, and would weep, shedding tears. Both knew why she was weeping. His poor mother could not ask him to return for fear of her other sons and daughters. She herself had also become dependent on them after her husband’s death. He shook his head with the difficult memories and thoughts of the past; then, thinking about the coming day, he rose nervously, and sat back again.

“The hell with all of it,” said Sayilkhon, raising his cup to forget the unpleasant thoughts.

He drank up the cup and crunched up the salted cucumber with relish. But his relatives sat there, watching the actions of their drunkard brother with disapproval.

The room became quiet. From time to time, Bekposhsha would pick up the pieces of bread under the low table.

“I’m out of here, have several errands to do. Have to take care of them by tomorrow. Yesterday I spent all day there too”, Qodir said standing up and putting on his coat, as if expecting something to happen.

In his treatment of his brother there was contempt and distaste, and a wish to escape from the family always ripe with crises. He did not want to join the general spirit ruling the family.

“Is Saodat well?”, asked Poshsha without being aware of speaking.

Qodir had already reached the door. “Hmm... I saw her. Her children were around”. Saodat was their youngest sister; the relations between them were cold. Three–four years ago Saodat borrowed three thousand dollars from Qodir and could not repay the debt in time. But had her husband not died she would have paid the debt since. Later on, she brought him two or three carpets and her gold jewelry. That’s why Qodir was grumbling. When Sayilkhon saw his brother leaving he could barely even say “eh... eh...”; he was surprised at his demonstrative exit without a word of good bye. Though he lost his family, his job and house because of drink, and lived in a little room like a hen’s house, he would make an effort for his brothers and sisters. But his brothers would not treat him humanely, rather, more like a stranger. The fact that Qodir was leaving without a word and at once was a vivid proof of his conclusion. Even if he could bear his wife and children leaving him, the behavior of his brother and sisters towards him was beyond his endurance. Why?

“Won’t you sit here”, said he.

As he addressed his brother, something seemed to be eating up his inner world. Initially, it was his little brother who had to say good bye and leave. In any case he was the guest and

their eldest brother, after all. “I’ll come in the evening”, said Qodir, closing the door. Sayilkhon sighed deeply. When he had held a high official position he had his brother study at Medical Institute. Then he had arranged him a good job at one of the best known clinics of the country.

“Don’t worry brother, let him go. He has already given up on behaving like a human”, said Bekposhsha, sipping her soup. “Help yourself. Don’t worry about them. Are his wife’s relatives and grooms, and the husbands of his wife’s sisters healthy? With them he ate, with them he pissed into the same hole. He’d invite strangers as guests to his house every week and boast to them about his nobility and wealth. He would not come see his old father and mother more than once in two or three months”. “When mother would ask money for medicine, he would say, ‘I have only fifty soums in my pocket’”, said the sister, burning with pity, and wiping the tears from her eyes as she blew her nose.

“If you say ‘nothing’, ‘possession’ becomes nothing”, - they said to my brother. “If you keep saying ‘no’, ‘no’, God will not stand it anymore; then He won’t give you anything either. The reason for all this was their quarrel with Saodat”. “Oh, you shouldn’t have quarreled with your mother. You have no idea, brother; they have all turned into animals. I’ve given money to Saodat myself. She had nothing, not even a penny to bury the dead”.

Sayilkhon turned his dizzy eyes to the window behind which a dark sky could be seen. From there, he heard the coughing and the low voices of some folks. They seemed to be nailing something: “Taq-tuq”. “Taq-tuq”. He took a crumpled box of “Caravan”s from his pocket and lit one.

“Pfhh. That stinks. Why do you smoke that, brother?” His sister stared down at the cheap cigarette. There had been times when her brother used to smoke expensive and thin English cigarettes. “These might harm your heart and lungs,” said his sister in a mournful voice and covered her nose with her robe’s collar.

“The tobacco must be really bitter. On the trip here the woman sitting next to me covered her nose and mouth all the way, though I was not even smoking,” he said, glad that the topic of the conversation had changed. Otherwise she didn’t know what to say to express her attitude toward her brother’s life. She knew that her brother’s anger was never too far off, and that he was greedy, too. But he must have lost confidence in himself because he didn’t dare to say it.

“In the past you didn’t use to smoke very much, brother. Your face has turned dark too. Do you remember when we students had been volunteering in the cotton fields, you came to see me. At that time all the girls were dying for you. You had brought us a big cooked fish”, she said and put a piece of cold meat into her mouth. “Seeing you, our dean would salute you too. Oh my brother, your wife could not hold the power. She ate you up” ... as the saying goes, “It is the wife who can make her husband a worthy man or the most worthless being on earth”. She drove your guests out from the house, visited your work, raised quarrels and finally destroyed your respect and reputation”.

Our poor mother used to say: “Your brother is drinking because of his sufferings”.

As if Bekposhsha were speaking about some other man, Sayilkhon would smoke and crush the cigarettes in the ashtray, raising his eyebrows up and down. He recalled the year when his sister tended to shed tears for any little thing. When she used to complain about her life and her husband though there had been enough food in the house to feed a family for two or three years.

“Poshsha, is that thing lying in that corner of the courtyard the wooden seat swing we used to rock together in?”, he asked pointing his trembling finger and blowing smoke from his hairy nose holes.

His sister turned back and looked out.

“Yes, when they had cleaned the yard, they brought it out from the shed. They cut the rope of the swing, and were taking it to the dump. I had it put in that corner. We had grown up with it. It would be a memory. If I have it painted it will be as good as new”.

The guest lit another cigarette. The quietness in the house made him sad. Someone opened and closed the gate. His brother was walking out. It seemed he must have been talking to somebody on the telephone for a long time. He couldn't live a day without his cell phone.

“Thai's good; let it be there”.

“What?” said Bekposhsha, who had already started meditating about other things. Lying on a velvet pillow, Sayilkhon lit two more cigarettes, one after the other, and stretched out.

“Brother, are you going to stay two-three days? I would like to know when you'll be leaving. I don't want you to have the same sort of troubles again like the last time”, she said.

Though his sister was speaking the truth, he took her words to his heart. Really, when he thought about the next day, and did not know what to do, all other words were useless. When he had come three-four years ago, he would be a guest of his relatives and kin. He felt powerful at that time. He had stayed at his parents three-four days. When he was leaving, there was a fierce quarrel over the fare, for which he lacked money. His brother said as a rule: “I have not a single coin in my pocket”. His sister and sisters-in-law had quarreled too.

At that time in Sayilkhon's path of life, the troubles of his brother and sisters passed painfully through his memory. Now he felt too alien to share his concerns and sufferings with his kin. Then he could not stop himself, and tears started streaming from his eyes. The quarrelling parties stopped, as if surprised or something.

“Brother, you are a man, aren't you ashamed of weeping”, said Qodir. He took to heart the mercilessness of his relatives, their condemnation of him as a little child. Then he remembered his poor mother saying: “My son, it is not worth shedding tears about them. Should a man weep about money? They all taken together are not more than an ant before your nobleness”. “My dear mother, I'm weeping for my dignity. Mother...”, his crying grew louder. All his relatives considered him nothing but a fallen drunkard.

He hadn't even noticed when his sister had gone out. Lying on the pillow too long his neck now hurt him, and he was having a nightmare. He had been wandering somewhere with his father, mother and brothers. In the courtyard something kept making a mournful sound: “geek, geek”. It resembled the voice of bird coming from far away and having been left behind by its flock. He woke up by the sound of people talking in the courtyard. There was again the same sound: “geek, geek”. He lay there in the same position, feeling chilly without a blanket, but nobody put a cover over him. The sun had already risen. Though it was bright, it was chilly as the Aral Sea was not far away. Where had his sister gone? He wandered muddled around the room. His head was aching from the drink of the day before. A middle aged man came in, smiling.

“Oh, devil, Sayil, don't you recognize me? I heard from Poshsha in the street that you're here,” said the man smiling and opening his arms. Sayilkhon got up and embraced him. His friend's face was sticky, as if greased down with fat.

“I recognize you, recognize you!” he said, but could not remember at all who this was.

“Are your children doing well? What has happened to you? You are as skinny as you were in the tenth form!”

“Now being thin is the modern way,” said Sayilkhon, realizing the man in front of him used to be a class-mate.

“Come on, sit down. I was just washing up.”

“I just wanted to come and see you. You have become a stranger! You haven't visited our ovul for ages. The rivers we used to bathe and swim in kept drying out, and the sea almost has.

The fish have disappeared. Now there is barbed wire and borders everywhere. We'll only see those places in our dreams."

His head spinning, he kept looking at the guest's mouth. "There was so much work to do, the twenty years thundered by in a second".

Have you heard? Omongul passed away. After her mother's death she was left alone at home without anybody. Then suddenly she died too." The class-mate, who still hadn't remembered Sayilkhon's name, seemed to be speaking of an inanimate thing or an animal, clarified: "Before her death she used to say to women that she lived her life for the sake of one man only, and that man was you".

"Is it me she meant?" he wondered at his strange class-mate and the unbelievable words he spoke.

"Had she finished her studies?", said he, feeling uncomfortable to ask whether she had married.

"As her mother had fallen ill, she had to leave her studies in her second or third year. Then she worked in the library," said the class mate looking at the table cloth and swallowing.

"Shall we drink five grams of vodka?

Sayilkhon looked out, worried. There, all the world with its memories in his mind was passing painfully. Men with scull-cups on and women with shawls around their waists were doing their errands. A young unfamiliar clergyman from a neighboring community showed up and started reciting the Quran with a good declamation.

"Bottoms up, quickly," he said, unable to add "before they notice".

His hands shaking, he spilled the vodka. The class-mate was quiet and indifferent. Cup in hand, he kept uttering the toast. "... We live being proud of you. Even now I can't believe you are drinking with a tractor driver like me. Let's help each other on this happy day."

"Drink up", said Sayilkhon, drinking the second cup and looking out towards the courtyard as if ready to cry out.

"Omeen", he said getting up, and stretching, looking at the window and repeating "Ooomeen." As he entered the room, Qodir's eyes fell on the empty cups on the table and, catching sight of the plates with salty salads, his face grimaced.

"Brother, it was clear that God had already cursed you. Or you, an energetic man, wouldn't have fallen into such a state. Now you have found yourself companion. How could a man drink on this day of mourning!".

"Ehh, what's wrong with me? I have a tractor, possess the land of my own. I'll stop, even though you aren't throwing me out. You are rumored to look down on people," said the nameless friend to Qodir at once. He seemed to feel sorry for his brother, who was standing helpless, like a child.

"Brother, take a shower and do the ritual washing. We are leaving now," he said and went to meet the car that had pulled up at the gate.

Bekposhsha, wearing a blue kerchief around her head, had the swing brought out. People she didn't know carried the swing out to the street. The sound of the wooden parts rubbing against each other, "geek, geek," was heard from the street in time with the steps. So this was the noise that had been heard all night---it had been the swing that was making the woeful sounds. The color of the wood had not faded at all, it was almost new, except missing the rope. In Sayilkhon's childhood, when their mother had gone to work, he would swing with his young sister Saodat, seated right next to him. Sometimes his sister would fall asleep with a piece of bread in her mouth. Once, when the sister fell off the swing and her nose was bleeding, his father beat him severely.

"Brother, have you done your ablutions?". He was shocked by the words of his sister.

“What ablutions?”

“It is just the person you asked about . How could a drunkard brother do ablutions? You should have asked him for the empty bottles...” Sayilkhon looked at his sister with an expression in his eyes that said, “Please don’t tell him”.

“Ask him about the brand of the vodka he was drinking with his class-mate, the tractor driver,” said his young brother severely.

“Who gave you the right to condemn me? Did I get drunk for your money?” He said this inside himself, not out loud. There had been times when it was Qodir who was scared to utter a word in front of his brother.

Sayilkhon got into the minivan with his sisters. They drove towards the border on hilly, sloping roads. Her eyes swelled from weeping, Bekposhsha looked like an old woman, a shawl draped around her head. The van climbed up noisily. With each roar of the motor, the clergyman pleaded to God with a woeful voice: “May God forgive our sins”, “May the Almighty save us”, “Astaghfurulla”, “Astaghfurulla”. “Forgive us”, “forgive us”.

From time to time the horn of a car was heard: Qodir was in a car behind them. On both sides of the road, the grass and brush left over from the previous year had turned yellow from snow and rain, covered with dust and dirt. The fields were dressed in fur robes of snow; the colorless land on both sides seemed very familiar to Sayilkhon. Once he used to take the sheep to pasture with that tractor driver. He used to come there on his bike to pick mulberries. He used to pick cotton with his class-mates. When his father had sent him to cut grass for the cattle, he’d give Omongul half of the grass. The last time he came to the cotton plant director’s country house, he had caught big fish in the turn of the river.

“Bekposhsha, had that librarian Omongul gotten married?”

“Oh, brother, that woman had passed a virgin from this world. Didn’t marry, didn’t know what family life was. As a lonely girl she took care of her sick mother. Each time I saw her she would ask about you. She said you had studied together”.

“Hmm... A woman was gone, and all because of him. How cruel,” thought Sayilkhon. In his heart there were some unclear abstract feelings: were they sorrow, sadness, or suffering of loneliness?

The closer they drove to the river, the more he started to worry. There were shrubs on both sides of the road, and beyond there lay the fields covered with snow. The cries and weeping of his sister and relatives became much louder. In the back seat somebody, maybe one of his nephews, kept weeping “piq-piq.” The clergyman recited words to calm everyone down : “May God give you patience, it’s the will of Allah, what can you do now, this is your lot, destiny, we can be born together, but cannot die together.” Driving the steep, hilly roads up and down, the van came up to the place where the two banks of the river were very close. The river was running quietly and powerfully. The ice was glittering. The mourners got out of the van, one after the other. Stepping out on the land Bekposhsha cried out in grief: “My dear mother, my holy mother, my worshipping *kaba*”. Turning pale, Sayilkhon stood straight, at a loss for a while. The cold wind licked his face. His eyes did not see anything. On the opposite bank of the river somebody was waving a red flag for them. His whole body, removed from drinking, was trembling; he could barely see around himself. He had also left his glasses behind in town. Truth be told, one eye of his glasses had been broken, he could hardly read the newspapers, one eye closed. That’s why he was not seeing anything at all.

“Brother Sayilkhon, that is our mother’s coffin. That is my mom’s coffin. Saodat are you there? My dear Saodatjon. What can we do now?” Bekposhsha’s voice was choked. On the other bank, a little ways from the coffin and from the men wandering around it, a woman with a white shawl on her head was gesturing, raising her hands.

“Oh, woe, brother, woe. Our dear mother’s belly housed four children, but the poor woman she herself had no room in anybody’s house. Here, in this house she stayed three days, there, in that other’s house she stayed ten days. Her diabetes rose. She could not find medicine. Not only medicine, brother-- she could not find money. She would weep all night. Her sons, those lions, would say: “we gave you money last month, now it is Poshsha’s turn to give, Poshsha is rich.” But Poshsha doesn’t have a money making factory, does she? At last she went to Saodat’s house. In order to pass the border she saved up four months of her pension. No one helped the poor mother after you had left. ‘Bekposhsha, while I am alive and my eyes are open let’s move your brother back to the ovul. He is a soft-hearted guy. Don’t let him be in need, left poor and helpless in a strange city. His wife shall be judged by God’s will. He has never enjoyed the pleasure of his children, poor man. Let’s have him move back’- her mother used to say. He escaped from us, my poor son. He was sick and tired of our constant quarrels and our mercilessness, my poor son.

“Shut up, people are looking? Don’t show off your shamelessness”, said Qodir in a loud whisper.

Wiping her tears Bekposhsha raised her head at once. The tear drops around her eyes sparkled like bits of ice. Her anger rose, to get revenge from the world. The frozen bank of the river broke: “crack-crack”. “Who is to shame, brother, - the person who would not visit her mother once a month, or me? My poor mother used to plead to God to bring her some black bread at least. You used to go to the city every day. You used to bring sacks of sweets-candies to your house. Ehh, now there’s the bread. Who needs it. Oh, poor mother, no one gave her neither love nor mercy.”

“Don’t make my blood boil! Let everybody speak, except you”, said Qodir opening his eyes wide and adjusting his expensive fur hat. You, yourself used to take home my mother’s things and belongings until mother died. You emptied her box of belongings. Now you are talking about merciful? Your intentions were bad”.

“It is you who had bad intentions. Whenever we saw you, you used to insult mother, making her weep. And every time she wept, her diabetes ran high and keep her in bed. That idiot youngest brother digs the land like a rat. Whenever you see him, he sits in a tea house, drinking. His drinking was nobody’s business. But the elder brother is poor, and a widower. Now she turned him out to be a drunkard. “If you are poor, your wisdom will not be accepted”, it is said, accurately. Oh, dear mother, you used to say: “I’d rather be hungry and be in peace. Your sister is alone. I’ll take care of her children”. At that time the damn borders had been closed too. Brother, the world was closed. Neither the dead, nor the living would be allowed to pass. Oh, God! What days we had. Dear mother, whose dead body was being moved here and there. Dear mother, you were left far away, mommy”.

“Shut up!. You will teach each other to pieces before mother is buried in earth. Shut up, both, shut up!” ordered Sayilkhon, using a voice he had not used in a long while.

All looked up and stared at him in astonishment. The river Amu, and even the other bank seemed to calm down.

In addition to his eyes, which could not see well, Sayilkhon’s ears had also stopped hearing. Far away, on the other bank of the river, people were wandering around a red thing like honey bees. Then, suddenly, they went down on their knees. Just next to them the mahalla started reciting the ceremonial prayer: “... Qulhu Allohu ahad, Allohu somad ...” From far away a chilly wind kept bringing the recital of the Quran suras. It was only then that Sayilkhon understood the essence of the strange ceremony: Saodat had brought her mother’s coffin to the river bank “for her kindred folks to express their final farewells”. At a little distance, here were some apartment buildings for the border troops, surrounded by barbed-wire topped walls, and unfamiliar flags were waving high up there. Along the barbed wire, armed guards in military

uniforms were walking up and down. People on both banks of the river raised their hands to their faces uttering “Omin Allohu Akbar”. At that moment a red velvet cloth on the coffin fell, flying down on the earth. It was as if the shawl from her mother’s head had fallen down. The groups on both banks stood frozen, as if there was nothing left to say. The ice on the river broke, “crack-cracking”. Then a man stepped forward and said something, shouting in a loud voice. The wind blew his words far away, into the infinite. Qodir’s cell phone started ringing along the transnational border.

“Brother, step forward and show yourself”. A week before, our dead mother had had a missing feeling about you and her soul could not leave her unless she saw you. Sayilkhon hardly dared to walk forward. The wind was passing through his soul and body, ruined by drink. He seemed like a tiny dot in the endless fields, deserts and oceans. The chilly wind of the country fluttered his thinning hair. The swing’s woeful sound was heard from somewhere. The swing and the river were making strange, sad, noises. Undisturbed by these noises, the river Amu was flowing quietly and powerfully. Sayilkhon was standing there as if frozen, his face pale and trembling. He was frozen, and could neither see nor hear anything.

“My dear mother, will you accept my confession, mummy?”.

Sayilkhon felt a lump in his throat. He was weeping noiselessly, his shoulders were shivering. On the other bank folks were departing, the coffin high on their shoulders, and the strange ceremony was coming to an end. Suddenly, the world surrounding him lost its essence, and now the land where he had been born became completely alien to him.

*Translated from the Uzbek by Kosim Mamurov*