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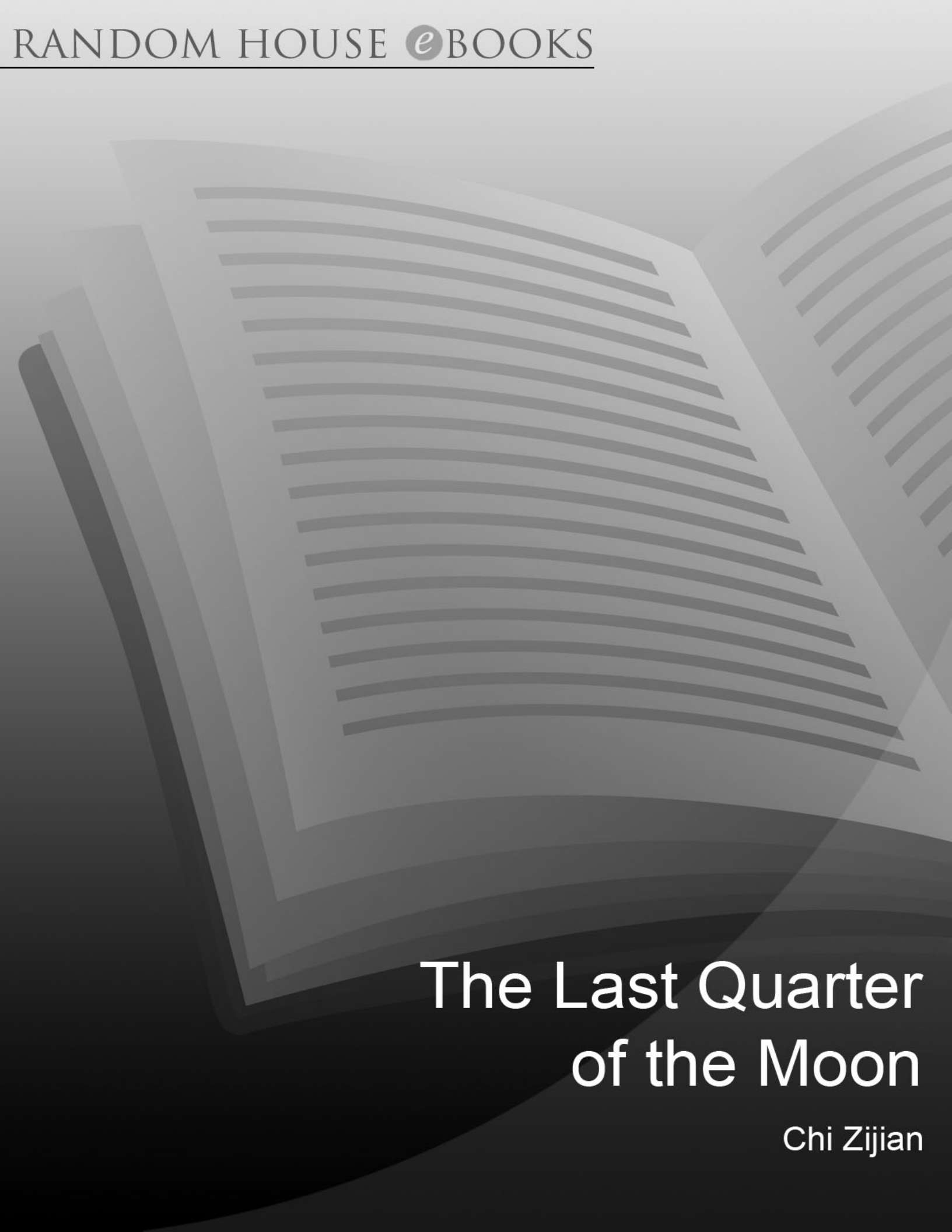

The Last Quarter of the Moon

Chi Zijian

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About the Book

‘A long-time confidante of the rain and snow, I am ninety years old. The rain and snow have weathered me, and I too have weathered them’.

At the end of the twentieth-century an old woman sits among the birch trees and thinks back over her life, her loves, and the joys and tragedies that have befallen her family and her people. She is a member of the Evenki tribe who wander the remote forests of north-eastern China with their herds of reindeer, living in close sympathy with nature at its most beautiful and cruel.

An idyllic childhood playing by the river ends with her father’s death and the growing realisation that her mother’s and uncle’s relationship is not as simple as she thought. Then, in the 1930s, the intimate, secluded world of the tribe is shattered when the Japanese army invades China. The Evenki cannot avoid being pulled into the brutal conflict which marks the first step towards the end of their isolation …

In *The Last Quarter of the Moon*, prize-winning novelist Chi Zijian, creates a dazzling epic about an extraordinary woman bearing witness not just to the stories of her tribe but also to the transformation of China.

About the Author

Chi Zijian was born in Mohe in 1964. She started writing while at school and had her first story published in Northern Literature magazine when she was at college. She is the only writer to have won the Lu Xun Literary Award three times. *The Last Quarter of the Moon* also won the Mao Dun Literary Award. Her work has been translated into many languages.


My paternal grandfather
My great-uncle
Nidu the Shaman
(my elder uncle)
Linke + Tamara
(my father) (my mother)
Yveline + Kunde
(my aunt) (Evelyn's husband)
Ivan + Nadezhda
(my father's cousin) (Ivan's wife)
(my eldest sister who died just after birth)
Lena
(my 2nd sister)
Luni + Nihau
(my sole brother) (Luni's wife)
Jindele + Zefirina
(my cousin) (my cousin's wife, then Little Dashi's wife)
Nora
Jilande
Grigori
(my eldest nephew)
Juktakan
(my eldest niece)
Tibgur
(my 2nd eldest nephew)
Berna
(my 2nd eldest niece)
Maksym
(my youngest nephew)
The Narrator
(me)
Vladimir
(my brother-in-law)
Lajide
(my 1st husband)
Valodya
(my 2nd husband)
Maikan
(Vladimir's adopted daughter)
Viktor + Lyusya
(my 1st son) (my daughter-in-law)
Andaur + Washia
(my 2nd son) (my daughter-in-law)
Tatiana + Suchanglin
(my sole daughter) (my son-in-law)
September + Lin Jinju
(my grandson)
An'tsaur + Yolien
(my grandson) (my granddaughter-in-law)
Irina
(my granddaughter)
Soma
(my granddaughter)
Shiban
(possibly fathered by An'tsaur)
July
(my great-grandson)
Sakhar
(my great-grandson)
Beriku
(my great-grandson)

The Last Quarter of the Moon

Chi Zijian

Translated from the Chinese by Bruce Humes

Harvill Secker

LONDON

PART ONE

DAWN

A LONG-TIME confidante of the rain and snow, I am ninety years old. The rain and snow have weathered me, and I too have weathered them.

Nowadays the summer rains are more and more sporadic, the winter snows lighter by the year. They're like my roe-deerskin under-bedding, which has shed its hairs from constant rubbing. Its thick undercoat has vanished with the wind, leaving behind scars accumulated over many moons. Seated on the deerskin, I'm like a hunter watching over a salt lick, but rather than deer with their beautiful erect horns, fierce winds swirling with sand await me.

When Shiban and the others left moments ago, the rain arrived. For more than two weeks the sun has appeared red-faced each morning, and in the evening descended yellow-faced into the mountains, never draping itself in clouds.

The blazing sunlight has licked the river water thin, and the grass on the hillsides that face the sun bows in submission.

I don't fear drought, but I fear the sound of Maksym crying. When the moon was full Lyusya wept, but Maksym covered his face and bawled as soon as he discovered the zigzagging crevices in the earth due to the great dry. They were like poisonous snakes out to kill him. I'm not afraid of crevices like that. In my eyes, they are the earth's thunderbolts.

An'tsaur is cleaning up the campsite in the rain.

Is Busu a place that lacks for rain? I ask An'tsaur. Did Shiban have to take the rain with him when he left the mountains?

An'tsaur straightens up, sticks out his tongue, licks the raindrops and laughs in my direction. When he smiles, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and on his cheeks smile too – the corners of his eyes in chrysanthemum patterns, his

cheeks in sunflower patterns. The rain nestles like drops of dew among his wrinkled blossoms.

Only An'tsaur and I remain behind in our urireng. *The others descended the mountains this morning in trucks with their belongings and their reindeer. We used to leave the mountains years ago, travelling to Uchiriovo and, more recently, to Jiliu Township where we would exchange our antlers and pelts for items like liquor, salt, soap, sugar and tea. Then we would return to the mountains.*

But this time they've left for good. They're going to a place called Busu. Beriku told me Busu is a big town at the foot of the mountains where many white-walled, red-topped houses have been built to serve as fixed residences. There are reindeer pens ringed by barbed wire, and from now on the reindeer will be cooped up.

I won't sleep in a room where I can't see the stars. All my life I've passed the night in their company. If I see a pitch-dark ceiling when I awake from my dreams, my eyes will go blind. My reindeer have committed no crime, and I don't want to see them imprisoned either.

If I can't hear those reindeer bells ringing like rippling water, I'll certainly go deaf. My legs and feet are accustomed to the jagged mountain paths, and if I have to walk the narrow, flat walkways of the town, my legs will become so flabby that they'll no longer support my weight, and I'll become a cripple. I've always breathed the fresh air of the mountain wilderness, and if I have to inhale the farts emitted by the cars in Busu, I'll suffocate.

My body was bestowed by the Spirits, and I shall remain in the mountains to return it to the Spirits.

Two years ago, Tatiana called the urireng *together to vote on whether to leave the mountains. She gave each person a square of white birch bark, and those in favour of departing were to place their square on the Spirit Drum left behind by Nihau.*

The Spirit Drum was quickly covered by birch bark, as if the Heavens had snowed goose feathers.

I was the last to rise. Unlike the others, I didn't walk towards the Spirit Drum but towards the fireplace, and I cast my birch bark there. It quickly turned to ash in the golden flames. As I emerged from the shirangju, *I heard Tatiana crying inside.*

I'd expected Shiban would gobble up his birch bark. Even when he was very young he liked to munch on bark, and he can't leave the forest behind. But in the end, he placed his square on the Spirit Drum like the others. I felt like it was his very sustenance that he put there. If he's taking such a bit of food with him, sooner or later he'll starve. I suppose Shiban must have agreed to leave the mountains on account of pitiful Vladimir.

An'tsaur put his square on the Spirit Drum too, but his action didn't mean anything. Everyone knew he didn't comprehend what he was called to do. He just wanted to get rid of the birch bark sooner so he could get back to his chores. An'tsaur likes to work. That day a wasp sting had swollen a reindeer's eye, and he was busy applying herbs to it when Tatiana called him for the vote.

An'tsaur entered the shirangju, *saw Maksym and Suchanglin place their squares on the Spirit Drum, and so he did too. The only thing on his mind was that reindeer's swollen eye.*

But unlike the others, An'tsaur didn't lay the birch bark down reverently. He released it from his hand nonchalantly as he exited the shirangju, *like a soaring bird oblivious to the loss of a feather.*

Even though only An'tsaur and I are in the camp, I don't feel a bit lonely. As long as I'm living in the mountains, even if I'm the last human being, I won't feel lonely.

I return to the shirangju, *take a seat on my deerskin under-bedding, drink tea and watch over the fire.*

Whenever we moved camp, we always took along the live cinders. But this time Tatiana and the others abandoned them here. Days without fire are cold and dark, and I truly feel sad and worried for them. They say that every house in Busu has a fire, so they won't need those coals any more.

But I imagine fire in Busu doesn't originate in the forest with the striking of a stone against flint. There will be no sunlight or moonlight in Busu's fire. How can a fire like that illuminate your heart and eyes?

This fire I watch over is as ancient as me. In the face of fierce winds, heavy snow or torrential rain, I never let it die out. This fire is my beating heart.

I'm not a woman who excels at storytelling, but at this moment, as I listen to the swishing of the rain and watch the dancing flames, I long for someone with whom to speak.

Tatiana has gone, Shiban has gone, and even Lyusya and Maksym have gone, so to whom shall I tell my story? An'tsaur isn't keen on talking or listening.

Then let the rain and the fire listen to my tale. For I know these foes, like human beings, have ears too.

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I am an Evenki woman.

I am the wife of our people's last Clan Chieftain.

I was born in the winter. My mother is called Tamara, and my father Linke.

The day Mother gave birth to me, Father killed a black bear. He located a hollow tree trunk where a bear was hunkered down in his winter storehouse, and he provoked him with a birch pole. Anger spurs bile production, swelling the gall bladder, so Father waited until the hibernating bear was enraged before he raised his hunting rifle and shot him dead.

That was Father's lucky day. He reaped a double harvest: a bear's plump gall bladder and me.

The first sound I heard as I came into the world was the screeching of ravens. But they weren't real ravens. Because a bear had been killed, the entire *urireng* had gathered for a feast. We worship the bear, so when we eat its flesh we shriek like ravens – *Ya! Ya! Ya!* – to convince the bear's soul that these jet-black birds – and not human beings – are dining on its carcass.

Children born in the winter often take sick and die because of the bitter cold, and I had an elder sister who perished like that. The day she was born the sky was heavy with snow, and Father was out searching for a lost reindeer.

It was very windy, and a fierce gust lifted up one corner of the *shirangju* that Mother had constructed especially for giving birth. My sister caught cold and lived just two days.

When a fawn dies, at least it leaves a pretty hoof print on the forest floor. But my sister departed like the wind that ravaged her. Just a split second's sigh and then a deafening silence.

She was placed in a white cloth bag and flung on a south-eastern hillside facing the sun. Mother was devastated. So when she bore me, she wrapped the animal hides good and tight around the *shirangju*, fearful that another gust of frigid wind would stick out its man-eating tongue and make off with her infant.

Of course, Mother only told me all this when I was grown. 'The night you were born,' she said, 'they lit a bonfire on the snowy ground, and the whole *urireng* feasted on bear meat and danced. Nidu the Shaman danced right into the flames, but though his buckskin boots and roe-deerskin coat were covered in sparks, they weren't even singed.'

Nidu the Shaman was our *urireng*'s Headman. I addressed him as *Egdi'ama* – Uncle – since he was my father's elder brother. My memories commence with him.

Besides my sister who vanished with the wind, I had another elder sister, Lena. One autumn Lena grew sick. She lay in the *shirangju* on the deerskin under-bedding with a

high fever, not eating or drinking, drifting in and out of sleep, and talking gibberish.

Father built a four-pole shelter outside the south-east corner of our *shirangju*, slaughtered a white reindeer, and requested that Nidu the Shaman perform a Spirit Dance for Lena.

Egdi'ama was a man, but since he was a Shaman, he was obliged to dress like a woman. When he performed a Spirit Dance, his chest was padded. He was very stout, and after he donned the weighty Spirit Robe and Spirit Headdress, I thought he wouldn't even be able to turn around. But he whirled about with great agility as he struck the Spirit Drum.

He danced and chanted from sunrise until the stars appeared, all the while searching for Lena's *umai*, her fledgling soul. Suddenly he collapsed.

The instant he dropped, Lena sat up. She asked Mother for water, and she even said she was hungry.

When he came to, Nidu the Shaman told Mother that a grey fawn had gone to the dark realm on Lena's behalf.

Mother took my hand and led me out of the *shirangju*. In order to entice the does to return rather than gorge on mushrooms far away, we tied up their fawns in the campsite. In the starlight I saw one of these fawns – bursting with playful energy just a while before – motionless on the ground. I grasped Mother's hand tightly and felt a ghostly shiver run down my spine. That shiver is my earliest memory. I must have been four or five.

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The only dwellings I ever saw as a child were our *shirangju*, which are shaped like umbrellas. We have another name for them too: Abode of the Immortals.

They're easy to construct: you chop down twenty or thirty larch trees, saw the trunks into poles about twice a man's height, peel off the bark, sharpen one end, and gather the

poles together with the sharp ends pointing to the sky. The poles are evenly spaced in the soil, like countless dancing legs forming a big circle, and then a covering is wrapped around them to protect against the wind and the cold. In the early days we covered them with birch bark and animal hides, but later we used canvas and felt.

I like living in a *shirangju*. It has a tiny opening at the top that serves as an exit for smoke from the hearth. At night I gaze at the stars through this tiny opening. Only a handful of stars are visible from there, but they are exceptionally bright, like oil-lamps held aloft by the *shirangju*.

Father preferred not to go to Nidu the Shaman's dwelling, but I loved to visit, for inside lived more than just a human being; Spirits lived there too. We call our Clan Spirits *Malu*. They were packed inside a leather bag, and the shrine was directly opposite the entrance. Before the adults went hunting they often kowtowed to the *Malu*.

This made me very curious. I begged Nidu the Shaman to untie the bag and let me see the Spirits. Were They made of flesh? Could They speak? Did They snore in the middle of the night like humans? Whenever Nidu the Shaman heard me speak like that about the *Malu*, he grabbed his drumstick and chased me out.

Nidu the Shaman and Father didn't act like blood brothers at all. They rarely spoke and never hunted together. Father was very lean, but Nidu the Shaman was pudgy. Father was a master hunter, while Nidu the Shaman often returned empty-handed. Father was talkative, but even when Nidu the Shaman summoned everyone in the *urireng* to discuss a serious matter, his words were few and disconnected.

It is said that the night before I was born, Nidu the Shaman dreamed that a white fawn would arrive in our camp. This was auspicious, so he showed unmatched joy at my birth, drank more than his share of liquor and that was what made him dance right into the bonfire.

***

Father loved playing jokes on Mother. In the summertime he often pointed at her and warned: ‘Tamara, Ilan is nipping at your dress!’

Ilan was our family’s hunting dog. *Ilan* means ‘ray of light’, so I especially loved to call for him when the sky grew dark. I thought when he came running he might bring some brightness along. But he was just like me, a shapeless shadow in the darkness.

Mother’s yearning for summer wasn’t born of a desire to see the forest flowers blossom – she just wanted an excuse to slip on one of her dresses, for she loved to dress up. When she heard that Ilan was chewing on her dress, she’d leap up and Father would chortle gleefully. Mother liked to wear her grey dress, which was embellished with a green waistband, wide in the front and narrow at the back.

With her strong arms and sturdy legs, Mother was the most capable woman in our *urireng*. She had a wide forehead, and she squinted as she smiled, giving her a very gentle expression. Other women always wrapped their heads in blue headscarves, but she left hers uncovered, coiling her thick, jet-black hair in a chignon fixed with a moon-white hairpin of polished deer bone.

‘Tamara, come quick!’ Father often summoned her just like he summoned us. Mother would saunter over, and Father would give her lapel a tug, pat her on the behind, and announce: ‘It’s nothing. Off you go!’ And Mother would purse her lips and silently return to her chores.

Lena and I learned chores from Mother: how to tan a hide, smoke meat-strips to make jerky, milk reindeer, make a birch-bark basket or canoe, sew roe-deerskin moccasins and gloves, make a reindeer saddle, and how to bake *khleb*, our unleavened bread.

Father felt envious when he saw us flutter about Mother like butterflies bewitched by a flower. ‘Tamara,’ he would

say, ‘you must give me an *utu*.’ A son, that is. Like other Evenki girls, Lena and I were *unaaji*. Father dubbed Lena his big *unaaji*, so I became his little *unaaji*.

Deep in the night, we could often hear the sound of wind blowing outside our *shirangju*. In winter it was mingled with the cries of wild animals, while the summer wind carried the hooting of owls and the croaking of frogs.

Inside our *shirangju* there were wind-sounds too, ones that were created from Father’s panting and Mother’s murmuring. Ordinarily, Mother never called Father by his name, but deep in the night when they made their wind-sounds, she would call out fervently, her voice quivering: ‘Linke! Linke!’ As for Father, he would struggle for breath like a strange beast on the verge of death.

I thought they must both be gravely ill. But they would wake and go about their chores with warm, rosy faces the next morning. In the midst of one of those flurries, Mother’s tummy grew bigger and bigger, and not long after, my brother Luni was born.

Tamara loved Luni. She could have easily left him in the birch-bark cradle when working, but no, she carried him on her shoulder. This meant she couldn’t wear her polished deer-bone hairpin, since Luni was forever trying to grab and chew it. The hairpin was pointed, and my mother feared that he would cut his mouth on it. But I liked her best with that hairpin in place.

Lena and I adored Luni too, and we competed to hold him. He was good and plump, like a roly-poly bear cub, and he gurgled and dribbled saliva onto my neck, which felt like a creeping caterpillar. How it tickled! In the winter we liked to run a squirrel’s tail across Luni’s face, and he’d giggle uncontrollably. In the summer we carried him piggyback down to the riverside and snared dragonflies in the reeds to show him.

Once when mother was feeding salt to the reindeer, Lena and I hid Luni outside the *shirangju* in a big grain barrel.

Mother came back and discovered that Luni was missing. She became frantic. She looked everywhere, but Luni was nowhere to be seen. When she asked Lena and me, we shook our heads and said we didn't know. She broke down in tears.

It seemed that Luni and Mother were connected at the heart. At first he lay quietly in the barrel, basking in the sunlight. But when she cried, he began to wail. Luni's cry was laughter to mother's ears. She followed that sound to its source, held him close and gave us a fierce scolding. That was the first time she lost her temper with us.

Luni's arrival forever changed the way we spoke about our parents. Before, like other obedient children, we addressed Mother as *Eni*, and Father as *Ama*. But because Luni was our parents' favourite, Lena and I grew jealous, and we secretly ridiculed them by referring to them as Tamara and Linke. Sometimes I still forget to correct myself when I mention them now. May the Spirits forgive me!

In our *urireng*, every adult male had a woman at his side. Linke had Tamara, Hase had Maria, Kunde had Yveline, and Ivan had his blue-eyed, golden-haired Nadezhda.

But Nidu the Shaman was all alone. I figured that one of the *Malu* we prayed to inside the deerskin bag must be female. Otherwise, why wouldn't he want a woman of his own? The fact that Nidu the Shaman was together with a female Spirit didn't seem strange, but since they couldn't have a child, it was a pity. A camp without children was like trees short of rain – a bit cheerless.

Ivan and Nadezhda, for example, were always teasing their son and daughter, Jilande and Nora, and laughing. Jindele, the son of Kunde and Yveline, wasn't particularly lively but he was like a mid-summer cloud that brings a hint of coolness, and this calmed their spirits.

But Hase and Maria were childless, and their faces were always covered in dark clouds. When Rolinsky the Russian *anda* came to our camp, liquor, tea and sweets weren't all

he brought to Hase's *shirangju*; there were medicines, too. But after Maria took them to treat her infertility, her tummy still looked the same. This upset Hase so much that sometimes he looked as helpless as a cornered elk bull.

Maria often covered her face in a scarf, lowered her head and went to Nidu the Shaman's *shirangju*. It wasn't a human being to whom she was going to pay her respects; it was the *Malu*. She fervently hoped that They would favour her with a child.

Yveline was Father's sister, and she was keen on storytelling. She's the one who told me all of our folk tales, and about the bad blood between Father and Nidu the Shaman. Of course, I heard the legends when I was very young. But the stories of romance and revenge between adults were recounted to me only after Father died, when Mother and Nidu the Shaman went mad, first one, then the other. By that time, I was almost a mother myself.

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I've seen many a river in my lifetime. Some narrow, others wide; some winding, some straight; some swift flowing, others free of wind and wave. And it is we Evenki who bestowed names upon them: the Delbur Béra, Hologuya Béra, Bischiya, Bistaré, Iming Do and Talyan. Most are tributaries of the Argun, or tributaries of tributaries.

My earliest recollection of the Argun has to do with the winter.

That year the snow fell until it obscured the sky and blanketed the earth at our northern campsite. The reindeer couldn't find food, so we were forced to relocate to the south. We hadn't caught any game for two days, and one-legged Dashi sat atop his reindeer cursing those men blessed with a pair of good legs for their uselessness. He announced he had fallen into a dark world where he was going to starve to death. We had to approach the Argun, he

said, and bore an opening in the ice cover with an ice pick in order to catch fish.

The Argun was immense. Frozen over, it looked like a massive, freshly made snowland.

A skilled fisherman, Hase drilled three ‘eyes’ in the ice, and waited, spear in hand. The big fish that had kept their distance from the ice now assumed that spring had returned at last. Their heads and tails wiggling, they briskly approached the holes where natural light was pouring in. When Hase saw the water whirling around the holes, with his sharp eyes and nimble hands he thrust his spear and quickly pierced fish after fish. There were black-spotted pike and even Siberian salmon with fine stripes.

Each time Hase speared a fish, I jumped up and down for joy. But Lena, Jilande and Jindele were afraid to gaze down into the holes. Those ice-eyes exhaling steam looked like traps, and all three kept their distance.

Nora was a few years younger than me, but just as daring. She bent down and stuck her head over the holes. Hase warned her to stay back: ‘If you slip and fall in, you’ll be food for the fish!’

At this, Nora took off her deerskin hat, shook her head energetically, stamped her feet and cursed. ‘Throw me in right now,’ she said, ‘and I’ll swim here every day. When you want fish, just knock on the ice and call “Nora”. I’ll butt through the ice and give you a live one! And if I can’t, then just leave the fish to eat me up!’

Her words didn’t bother Hase, but they spooked Nora’s mother Nadezhda who came galloping towards her, making the sign of the cross over her chest again and again.

Nadezhda was Russian. Her union with Ivan not only produced two golden-haired, fair-skinned children, it also brought us Eastern Orthodox doctrine. In our *urireng*, Nadezhda prayed to the *Malu* and worshipped the Virgin Mary too.

This made aunt Yveline look askance at Nadezhda. I didn’t mind that Nadezhda believed in an extra Spirit or two, for back then I believed they were invisible, but I didn’t like it when she made the sign of the cross over herself. For all the world it looked like she was about to cut out her heart with a dagger.

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At dusk, we lit a bonfire on the frozen Argun. We fed the pike to the hunting dogs, but we sliced the meaty Siberian salmon into sections, sprinkled them with salt, skewered them with birch branches, and rotated them over the fire. The aroma of roasted fish spread quickly throughout the camp.

The adults ate fish and drank while Nora and I raced each other along the shore, leaving queues of dense paw prints like a pair of hares.

I still recall how Yveline called us back when Nora and I reached the opposite bank. ‘You shouldn’t just go over there like that,’ she warned me, ‘that’s not our territory any more.’

But gesturing at Nora, Yveline added: ‘She can go because that’s her homeland. Sooner or later, Nadezhda will take her and Jilande back to the Left Bank.’

To me, a river was a river and there was no distinction between a right and a left bank. Just look at the bonfire: it was burning on the Right Bank, but its flames tinted the snowy wilderness of the Left Bank scarlet too.

Nora and I paid no heed to Yveline and kept right on running from one side of the river to the other. Nora deliberately relieved herself on the Left Bank, and then returned to the Right Bank and told Yveline loudly: ‘I took a pee back in my homeland!’

Yveline threw Nora a scornful look, as if eyeing a newly born deformed fawn.

That night Aunt Yveline told me that the Left Bank of the Argun was once our territory – our homeland – and that we had been the masters of that land.

More than three hundred years ago, Russian soldiers invaded our ancestral territory. They provoked war, and stole the marten pelts and reindeer of our forefathers. With their swords they chopped in two the men who resisted their violence, and used their bare hands to strangle the women who wouldn't submit to rape.

The once tranquil mountain forests, shrouded in dark smoke, descended into chaos. Quarry became less abundant year by year, and our ancestors were forced to migrate from the Lena River Valley in Yakutia, cross the Argun, and begin their lives anew on the Right Bank. So we became known as 'Yakuts'.

When we lived by the Lena River, we were twelve clans strong, but by the time we relocated across the Argun, we were just six. Many clans scattered as the years flowed and the winds blew. And so I do not wish to utter the name of our clan. That is why the people in my story have only first names.

The Lena is a blue river. Our legends say it is so vast that even a woodpecker cannot fly across its expanse. Upstream from the Lena is Lake Lamu, known to others as Lake Baikal, a blue-green lake fed by eight great rivers. Because it lies close to the sun, sunlight floats atop its waters year-round, turquoise aquatic grasses grow thick, and pink and white water lilies abound. Towering mountain peaks surround Lake Lamu. Our Ancestor – a long-braided Evenki – once dwelt among them.

'Does winter come to Lake Lamu?' I once asked Yveline.

'The birthplace of our Ancestor has no wintertime,' she replied.

But I couldn't believe that there was a world where it was forever springtime, forever warm, because each year brought a long winter and bitter cold.

So after Yveline recounted the legend of Lake Lama, I went straight to Nidu the Shaman to get to the bottom of it. Nidu the Shaman didn't confirm the legend, but he attested to the fact that we once hunted freely throughout the Left Bank. He even said that the reindeer-herding tribe that lived in Nerchinsk presented marten pelts as an annual imperial tribute to our Manchu court.

It was those big-nosed, blue-eyed Russian soldiers who forced us over to the Right Bank. I didn't know the exact locations of the Lena River and Nerchinsk, but I did grasp that those lost lands were all on the Left Bank – a place where we could never again go. This filled me with hostility towards big-nosed, blue-eyed Nadezhda when I was young. She reminded me of a she-wolf tracking a reindeer herd.

Ivan was *Egdi'aya*'s son, the son of my great-uncle, that is. He was rather short, his face very dark, and he had a reddish mole that stood out like a 'love-pea' on his forehead. Black bears adore eating those sweet red peas. Whenever Father spotted bear tracks on a hunt, he joked with Ivan to be extra careful for fear a bear would attack him. But there was something to Father's words. For some reason, the sight of Ivan agitated bears more easily than other people, and he had two narrow escapes from a bear's mammoth paws.

Ivan's teeth were rock-hard and he loved to eat raw animal flesh. Whenever we went without game, Ivan was the most miserable one in the clan for he wouldn't eat jerky and turned his nose up at fish. Fish was for children and old people whose teeth weren't in good shape.

Ivan's hands were gargantuan. When he spread them over his lap, they wrapped around his knees like thick tree roots. And those hands of his were mighty. They could crumble a cobblestone and snap larch trunks in two, so we could construct a *shirangju* without an axe. Yveline said that it was Ivan's uncommonly powerful hands that made Nadezhda his woman.

Over a century ago gold deposits were discovered in the upper reaches of the Argun. Knowing there was gold on the Right Bank, Russians often crossed the border to prospect illegally. Back then Emperor Guangxu was on the throne. How could he watch as the grand Qing Dynasty's gold poured into the hands of blue-eyed foreigners?

So the Emperor ordered Li Hongzhang to put a stop to it, and Li dreamed up the idea of operating a gold mine in Mohe City near the river. But six months of every year snowflakes fall on this desolate and sparsely inhabited land, so Li Hongzhang, a Senior Minister in the Court, wouldn't deign to set foot here. In the end, he selected Li Jinyong – the Jilin Deputy Magistrate demoted for opposing Empress Dowager Cixi – to establish a gold mine here.

Once the Mohe Gold Mine opened, stores appeared left and right. But just as fruit follows where there are flowers, brothels also popped up. Those gold-miners located south of the Great Wall hadn't set eyes on a woman all year, and when at last they did their eyes glowed brighter than when they saw gold.

In exchange for an instant of intimacy and pleasure, they'd sprinkle nuggets of gold over a woman's body, and so the brothel business abounded like raindrops in the summer. The Russian *anda* realised that the whorehouses paved the way to riches, and so these merchants brought their women – some hardly more than girls – and sold them into prostitution.

Yveline said that one year when they were hunting on the move in the Keppe River region and the autumn frost had already dyed the forest leaves in patches of red and yellow, a Russian *anda* crossed the Argun with three young ladies in tow. Riding through the dense forest, they proceeded towards Mohe City.

Ivan came across them while hunting. They had caught a pheasant, lit a fire and were eating and drinking. Ivan had seen that bush-bearded *anda* before, and he knew that

whatever the trader had with him was for sale. It looked like the gold mine needed more than goods and foodstuffs – it needed women too.

Thanks to years of contact, most of us can speak basic Russian, and the *anda* can understand Evenki. Of the three young women, two had winning looks, big eyes, high noses and slim waists, and they laughed raucously as they drank. They looked like experienced women of pleasure.

But the one with petite eyes was different. She drank quietly, her gaze fixed firmly on her grey-chequered skirt. Ivan surmised she must have been forced into prostitution or she wouldn't appear so despondent. The thought of men lifting up that grey checked skirt, again and again, made his teeth chatter. Never had a girl made his heart ache so.

Ivan returned to the *urireng*. He rolled up two otter, one lynx and a dozen or so squirrel pelts, mounted a reindeer and set out in pursuit of the *anda* and those three young ladies. When he caught up with them, he set the pelts on the ground, pointed to the maiden with the petite eyes, and told the *anda*: the girl belongs to Ivan, and the pelts belong to *anda*.

The *anda* judged the pelts too few, and announced he couldn't engage in unprofitable business.

Ivan strode over to the *anda*. He extended his big hand and plucked the iron flask from the *anda*'s chest. Ivan placed it in his palm, squeezed it hard, and it bent. When he gripped it more forcefully, the liquor squirted out in all directions. Now the flask formed an iron sphere.

The *anda*'s legs turned to jelly, and he let Ivan go at once with the petite-eyed girl. That was Nadezhda.

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Yveline said that Ivan enraged *Egdi'aya*, my great-uncle, to the point of death. Early on he had chosen a marriage for Ivan and planned to welcome the bride into their family that

winter. Who'd have imagined that Ivan would bring his own bride back in the autumn?

Ivan's assumption was not wrong. Nadezhda had indeed been sold by her black-hearted stepmother. Along the way she had tried twice to escape, and when the *anda* discovered this, he raped her to force her to accept her whore's fate. So when Ivan took her off with him, she went willingly but with a guilty conscience.

She didn't tell Ivan about being violated by that *anda*, but she revealed it to Yveline. Telling Yveline a secret was like recounting it to a songbird; no one in the *urireng* remained uninformed. At first my great-uncle was ill disposed towards Nadezhda simply due to her Russian extraction, but when he learned that she was a soiled woman, he ordered Ivan to banish her from the mountains. But Ivan didn't. He married her and the following spring she gave birth to a son, Jilande.

Everyone suspected the child was the offspring of the bush-bearded *anda*. As soon as blue-eyed Jilande was born, *Egdi'aya* began spitting blood. He ascended to the Heavens three days later. It is said that when he passed away, the morning clouds turned the east bright pink. He must have taken the blood he coughed with him.

Nadezhda had no experience of living in the mountain forests. At first she couldn't sleep inside a *shirangju* and often wandered about in the forest. She couldn't tan hides, smoke meat-strips or knead thread from tendon. She couldn't even make birch-bark baskets. Ivan noticed that, unlike Yveline, Mother was not hostile to Nadezhda, so he asked Tamara to teach her how to do chores. Among the woman of our *urireng*, Nadezhda was closest to Tamara.

This woman who liked to make the sign of the cross over her chest was clever. In just a few years' time, she mastered all the tasks that our people's women do. And she was extraordinarily good to Ivan. When he came back from the hunt she was always waiting there in the camp to welcome

him, hugging him tightly as if she hadn’t seen him for months.

Nadezhda was a head taller than Ivan. When she hugged him, it was like a big tree embracing a small tree, a mother bear hugging her cub. It made us laugh. But Yveline said that she acted like a whore.

It was Nadezhda who least liked the sight of the Argun. Each time we arrived there, Yveline addressed her with icy sarcasm, as if she were dying to transform Nadezhda into a gust of wind that would blow back to the Left Bank. Nadezhda eyed the Argun’s waters as if she were looking at a greedy master, her face filled with angst, terrified of being exploited again.

But we were unable to leave this river. We always treated it as our centre, living alongside its many tributaries. If the Argun is the palm of a hand, then its tributaries are five open fingers. They extend in different directions, illuminating our lives like flashes of lightning.

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I’ve said that my memories began with Nidu the Shaman’s Spirit Dance for Lena’s *umai*, when a fawn went to the dark realm on her behalf. So my earliest recollection of reindeer began with the death of that fawn.

I remember holding Mother’s hand when I saw it lying motionless under the stars. I felt so terrified, so heartbroken. Mother picked up the fawn that had ceased breathing and cast it on a south-eastern slope. The infants of our people who don’t survive are usually tied up inside a white cloth bag and thrown onto a hillside that faces the sun too. The grass there is the first to sprout in the spring, and wild flowers open the earliest. Mother treated the fawn as her own child.

I still recall the next day when the reindeer herd returned to the camp how that doe couldn’t find her offspring. She

lowered her head and kept looking at the tree trunk where her fawn had been tied, and her eyes were filled with grief. From then on, this doe – whose milk had been the most abundant – just dried up. It was not until later, when Lena went to the dark realm in pursuit of that fawn, that the doe's milk gushed forth again like water from a spring.

Legend has it that during the Lena River Era our ancestors herded reindeer. The forest was lush with the moss and lichen that we call *enke* and *awakat*, providing reindeer with rich foraging. Back then reindeer were known as *sugju*, but now we call them *oroong*. They have the head of a horse, antlers of a deer, body of a donkey and hooves of a cow. And because they resemble these four animals yet are distinct from them, the Han dub them *si bu xiang*, 'The Four Dissimilars'.

In the past, reindeer were mainly grey and brown, but nowadays they are multicoloured: mixed grey-and-brown, grey-black, white or dappled. I like the white ones the best. In my eyes, white reindeer are clouds fleeting across the face of the earth.

I've never encountered another animal that possesses the docile temperament and endurance of the reindeer. Despite their size, they are extremely nimble. Loaded down with heavy goods, they traverse mountain forests and cross marshes effortlessly. Their bodies are a treasure chest: their coat resists the cold, and their antlers, tendons, penises, placentas and even blood extracted from the heart after death are all precious medicinal ingredients, which *anda* gladly put in their pouches in exchange for the manufactured goods they bring.

The reindeer-milk tea that we drink in the morning is like sweet spring water flowing into our bodies. When we hunt, the reindeer is the hunter's helper: just place the game you've killed on top of a reindeer, and it will transport it safely back to the camp on its own. When we move camp,

they not only carry the things we eat and use: women, children and the old and weak also ride them.

Yet they don’t need much attention from people. They search for food on their own, and the forest is their granary. Besides moss and lichen, in the spring they also eat green grass, brambles and pasque-flowers. In the summer, they chew birch and willow leaves. In the autumn, tasty forest mushrooms are their favourite.

Yet reindeer forage very delicately. When they pass through a meadow, they nibble lightly so that hardly a blade of grass is harmed, and what should be green remains green. When they eat birch and willow leaves, they just take a few mouthfuls and move on, leaving the tree lush with branches and leaves.

As long as we tie a bell to their necks we needn’t worry where they go. Wolves are frightened away by the sound of the bell, and we know their location by its ringing, carried to us by the wind.

Reindeer were certainly bestowed upon us by the Spirits, for without these creatures we would not be. Even though they once took my loved one away, I still adore reindeer. Not seeing their eyes is like not seeing the sun in the day or the stars at night – it makes you sigh from the bottom of your heart.

I can hardly bear to watch the cutting of reindeer antlers, which is done with a bone-saw. Reindeer grow antlers regardless of gender. Typically, a buck’s antlers are robust while those of a castrated stag are more delicate. Every year between May and July their antlers mature, and this is the time when their horns are severed. Unlike hunting, both men and women carry out this task.

When its antlers are severed, the reindeer must be tied to a tree and held in place by two wooden poles. Antlers are flesh too, so sawing one off is so painful that the reindeer’s four hooves stamp to and fro and the bone-saw is steeped in fresh blood. After the antler has been severed, the base of

the antler must be cauterised with a hot iron to staunch the flow of blood. But that is the old way: nowadays we just sprinkle a bit of anti-inflammatory powder on it.

Maria would cry when antler-cutting time came. She couldn't stand to see the bone-saw tainted with blood. It was as if the blood flowed from her own body.

'Maria, don't go!' Mother would say, but Maria would insist. She didn't normally cry, but as soon as she saw blood, her tears would begin to fly – *bzz, bzz* – like a swarm of honeybees. Mother said Maria cried because she couldn't get pregnant. Month after month she saw blood emerge from the lower part of her body and immediately realised that her efforts and those of her husband Hase had come to naught, and she wailed despondently.

But the one who craved a child even more than Maria and Hase was Hase's father Dashi. Dashi had lost a leg in a battle with wolves, so at night when he heard their howling, Dashi gnashed his teeth. He was wizened and scrawny, and his eyes couldn't stand the sight of sunlight or snow, filling with tears constantly. He normally stayed inside his *shirangju*. When we moved camp, he would sit on his reindeer, his eyes blindfolded even when the sky was overcast. It seemed he not only couldn't stand the sunlight, he also couldn't bear the sight of trees, brooks, flowers and little birds.

Dashi had the greyest expression and was the untidiest person in our *urireng*. Linke said after Dashi lost his leg he never cut his hair or shaved. His sparse, salt-and-pepper hair and equally sparse beard intertwined, covering his face with a layer of grey-white lichen. It made you wonder if he was a rotting tree.

Dashi was taciturn, but if he spoke, it was always something about Maria's belly. 'Where's my *omolie*?' he'd ask. 'When will he bring back *Aya*'s leg?' In our language, *omolie* means grandson, and *Aya,* grandfather. Dashi believed that if he only had an *omolie*, the child would slay