

Two Short Stories from *Soviet Demons and Other Beasts*

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Translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

Story 1: “Shulikuns”

Only from the sky do all Shulikuns seem to look alike. Shulikuns are, in fact, like people: there are blonds and brunets among them. Some are a little pockmarked. Some have lips like a Chinese sleeper fish. And then there was Senka-Shulikun, who was large-mouthed, with dappled red hair and long, lush eyelashes like a lass’s, too bad they were whitish.

Senka’s name was actually Yesenaman but the commissar nicknamed him “Senka” so as not to tie his own tongue. For all Senka cared, they could call him a pot or a Red Armyman, particularly since he wouldn’t need to carry out the commissar’s stupid orders much longer. The first snow was already falling, meaning the river’d freeze soon and then Senka could leap into a hole in the ice. Just you go and find him! May that happen soon: he’d grown tired in Moscow and missed his own in Belebey, especially Ilesia, his betrothed.

How was she doing? Had she forgotten him in what was almost a year? Had she married someone? Shulikun girls do marry Shulikun boys early, in order to birth at least a couple dozen little Shulikunchiks during their short lives. Every year counted, you had to make it in time! Eh, Ilesia, Ilesia...

“I think of you every night, my darling. I think about how you and I splashed around in the reeds, taunting the pike fish. How we sat on the shore, unbeknownst to the elders, tangling

their nets and laughing. And how you later pressed your wet nose to my shoulder and kissed it. And I pretended not to notice...”

Those were the approximate words Senka whispered as he stood on night sentry duty at the Tverskoy outpost. His eyes were glassy in those moments, reflecting not the campfire, where the other guards warmed their hands, but the blue ice of the Belebeyka River.

Commissar Steiner, a curly-haired giant, went out to the Belebeyka River just before Yuletide, looked at the environs from the high shore, and came down to the rich settlement of Podlesnoye. It was there that he began mustering men, summoning them into the Red Army. “You must understand,” he proclaimed, full of feeling as he looked into the villagers’ sleepy eyes, “that Soviet power is doing us a big honor by allowing peasants, the most powerless and demeaned class under the tsar, to give their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers for the defense of the Republic! So here it is! Either tomorrow you allow Soviet power to do you that honor by registering as volunteers or...” And then, as his final argument, he took out a Nagan.

The village men were accustomed to respecting outsiders with Nagans: there were usually dozens more just like them standing in the background, albeit armed with machine guns. Which is why they didn’t even consider refusing the commissar. They plied him with the strongest of home brews and offered a worthy substitute:

“Listen, Moiseich, how about we don’t give our sons but offer Shulikuns instead? Will you take them?”

Steiner, a nonlocal, knew no Shulikuns: there were none to be found around Odessa. He approached the question simply:

“How many of them will there be?”

“Many as you want. Couple hundred be enough?”

The commissar whistled with joy. Two hundred fighters was an entire squad!

“That’s enough. I’ll take them!”

So that was just before Yuletide. How was Steiner to know that was the time when Shulikuns came out of a hole in the ice and scattered like peas – you had to catch them fast! The freshly captured Shulikuns were delivered on sledges, by morning, right to the commissar’s home. Hungover and suffering, Steiner grumpily surveyed the new recruits.

“Why’re they so small?”

“They’ll still grow,” the village men shamelessly lied. “And my word they’ll be so strong later, you have a look! Wow!”

“But do they understand Russian?”

“How can I put it... If you use a fist to help, then yes, they’ll seem pretty quick. You just be strict with them, that’s the big thing.”

Steiner saw the need for strict treatment as soon as he attempted to untie them. The Shulikuns sensed freedom and scattered.

“Come on, halt!” the commissar yelled. He gunned down three particularly sneaky Shulikuns as a warning. The rest immediately went still.

“Attention! Eyes right! Behind me, forward march!” Steiner ordered as the frightened little greenhorns obediently trudged after the commander.

Steiner was already sick and tired of them a couple days later. As if it weren’t enough that you couldn’t get a wink of sleep, the bastards could run! They also came up short in terms of memory so Steiner had to use his last two cartridges to remind the Shulikuns of their debt to

Soviet power. Matters were now particularly dire because there was no defending himself if anything happened!

The Shulikuns, however, seemed to have sensed the commissar's desperate situation: they behaved utterly brazenly during a stop where Steiner got it into his head to improve their political literacy by reading points from the Revwarcommissar's order. The Shulikuns overran him in one big, threatening dark mass.

"Back! Halt, sons of bitches!"

But the Shulikuns seemed not to have heard him.

"I'll finish you all off right now," bellowed the commissar. As protection, he held out an ukase and a rolled-up issue of the *Red Proletariat* newspaper, crisscrossed. The Shulikuns unexpectedly stopped and began muttering something, gawking at the paper cross in the commissar's hands.

"Fall in!"

The Shulikuns quickly formed a fairly straight line.

"Quick march!"

And so the detachment stretched on, moving farther west. Steiner's life calmed after that. Any little thing and the Shulikuns got meekly obedient after a slam of the newspaper and a slap of the ukase on top, all cross-shaped. That was how they reached the station, where the commissar turned them over to Red Army commander Bekeris, a Latvian who was provided with the requisite instructions for building character.

Bekeris had eight subordinate Red Army men whose daily work involved using purely forceful methods to reinforce the character-building. Their efforts paid off: a week later the

freedom-loving Shulikuns displayed model behavior, apathy, and an utter lack of strength so no longer required guards.

Even when their echelon passed the Volga, where plenty of the holes glistening in the ice could have made easy spots to hide from the Red Army, the Shulikuns sat meekly on the plank floor of the train carriage, making no attempt to escape their destiny. Apparently their memories truly were short.

Only Senka's memory was good, since he'd been suffering for nearly a year over his separation from Ilesia and still dreamt of returning to the Belebeyka. That's what he'd been living on as he carried out his service in Moscow.

The Red Shulikun detachment was marching down Nikitskaya, heading off to guard storehouses of provisions. They kept their distance when passing churches, more out of some sort of genetic caution than because of memory. There was an unpleasant burning nearby, making them writhe horribly from internal pain and causing blisters to puff up. They were no longer sent to confiscate church valuables.

"Ilesia, I'll be back soon, I promise. You just wait for me, all right? Don't marry either that fat Khamza or that fool Tuley. You wouldn't be happy with them because happiness is when you love and are loved. I love you, Ilesia." Senka started acting according to habit again, sneakily looking at puddles along the way, wondering if any ice had formed. But no, there wasn't even any frozen mush yet.

They turned on Vozdvizhenka and it seemed right then that something had glinted in a window. Senka looked up and saw someone sitting above him. It was one of the flying ones that give you painful burns. Senka's head spun from the unbearable light. He squinted, stood for a bit,

and blinked before running after the others, as if he didn't want to get slapped with another shift for stepping out of line.

There was trouble at the storehouses formerly owned by merchants, the Mezhuevs. Hungry people were forcing their way in, shouting, "Bread! Bread!" The Red Armymen couldn't handle them. The Shulikuns arrived just in the nick of time. They ringed the storage facilities on command and held out their bayonets – just try and approach. People raised a little more of a ruckus and then dispersed. They already knew the Shulikuns neither feared death nor possessed any knowledge of compassion, meaning they'd remain at their post until the very end.

The atmosphere grew heated again by evening. Rumors had surfaced of preparations to send bread to the front, leaving Muscovites to die of hunger. And so an order came down for the Shulikuns to hold the line in two shifts, to quell counterrevolutionary activities from isolated elements.

Senka now turned out to be walking along Vozdvizhenka twice a day, from the barracks and back, noticing the window each time, with that same gleaming radiance that was inaccessible to the eye of a mere mortal. He was already used to lowering his head by house number thirteen and striding faster, to avoid the burning sensation.

Standing in a cordon is a boring and monotonous thing. As a poetic sort, Senka had begun thinking more about abstract topics while on duty. Why is it that one is fated to be born with wings but another is not? And do all winged beings cause such burning? Or are some among them normal? And does the one in the window know where the Belebeyka is...

"Hey, you!" The commander's shout returned wingless Senka to earth. "No leaning on the wall! Otherwise the enemy will see you and think a soldier of the revolution is sleeping! Attention!"

And Senka took a half-step away from the wall so as not to give in to temptation.

Everything in nature has its season: the nights had become longer; the moon now escorted the Shulikuns to their workplace in the morning rather than hiding; the final, most persistent, yellow leaves had settled underfoot in damp clumps; and puddles were covered in the first, still very fragile, skim of ice.

Senka feared more than anything that Ilsia was already thinking about marriage right now, in these very days. She didn't know he'd dreamt up an escape. She didn't even know he was alive! And so, well, how could you clomp calmly from the barracks to the storehouse when your whole life depended on whose wedding Belebey's Shulikuns would be celebrating on the Day of the First Frosts?

On one particularly dank and almost wintery morning, the column of Shulikuns somehow involuntarily veered away from house number thirteen on Vozdvizhenka, arcing to skirt it, and sticking close to the even side of the street. That very same unbearable gleaming was to blame. It had apparently tired of sitting in the window and now stood on the sidewalk, watching the maneuver with great interest. Nobody but Senka saw any sort of gleaming and the Shulikuns instinctively avoided the incomprehensible source of the burning sensation, quickening their pace and falling out of rhythm. Once they'd turned toward the stockhouses, though, Senka suddenly broke formation and ran off toward the gleaming figure.

"Commander, kind commander! Listen to me!" he said in Bashkir, trying with all his might to attract the departing angel's attention.

The angel turned. Senka ran to the angel, scratching along the way. He scratched more and more energetically as he drew closer, and burn blisters soon covered his face.

Senka stopped a meter away, covered his eyes with his hands, gasped for breath, and asked:

“Do you know the Belebeyka River? Yelga Belebey?”

“I understand you well. Speak!” came the answer in Bashkir.

Senka was happy and began speaking in rapid Bashkir:

“Master, I was born on the Belebeyka River. My betrothed is still there. I am very afraid she won’t wait for me and will marry someone else and will later cry her whole life. You have wings, master. Can you fly to the Belebeyka and find my betrothed there? You’ll recognize her right away: she’s very, very beautiful. Tell here I love her and will be back soon. I’ll definitely be back! Take pity on me, master, and fly to the Belebeyka!”

Stunned by the pressure, the angel nodded cautiously:

“Fine. I’ll fly there. What is her name?”

“Ilsia. Thank you, master...”

“Run. Or you’ll burn completely...”

And so Senka ran to the stockhouses. By evening, when he was at the infirmary, all coated in reeking burn ointment, he suddenly sensed – so strongly it was as if someone had told him calmly and certainly – that the angel had already passed his message along to Ilsia. And she had answered. May the bitter cold hit soon: his betrothed was anxiously awaiting him at the Belebeyka River!

A couple of days later, a new directive came down for the detachment of Red Shulikuns: depart for Irkutsk, where Kolchak’s army was living out its last days and desperately nipping back.



The detachment was loaded into cattle cars and the train headed east, blackening the sky with smoke and frightening off living creatures beside the road with a shrill wail:

“Choo-oo-oo-choo-oo-oo!”

“Oohoo-oo-oo-ooo-oooo,” agreed the wind.

“Khrrrr-kharrap!” said the bowing pines.

“Ilsia-il-sia!” the rails rang out.

The first river they encountered was too great so wouldn't freeze soon... The second river had a skim of ice that gladdened Senka's heart, and the third was already icy.

The decisive battle, the very reason the Shulikuns left Moscow, was supposed to unfold right there.

They were lined up early in the morning, when stars still shone through a shroud of November sky and the river was invitingly white under their cold light.

An artillery cannonade sounded, horses neighed, and fighters ran back and forth, dispersing the gloom. The detachment of Shulikuns stood in ambush, preparing to hit enemy forces from the left flank and chase them into the fire of the Fifth Army's primary units.

Senka's back sensed commander Bekeris's gaze – you'll get a bullet between your shoulders if you run now. No, he had to wait. Waiting was unbearable, though: everything within him trembled with impatience! Senka stood, picking up his feet ever so little, his eye cast toward the river.

And now the pale sun rose over the field of battle, blinding the attackers. Pressed against the mound-like hills, Kolchak's troops used their remaining strength to move forward. Bekeris realized it was time and lifted his Nagan over his head.

If measured in human terms, it was about a hundred paces to the river. It was a full two hundred for a Shulikun, though. Senka didn't even notice the first fifty. He ran along with everyone else, shouting curses. Later, though, after Bekeris turned right, plunging into the enemy soldiers' sparse ranks, Senka went silent and abruptly struck off in another direction. He nearly landed under the hoofs of a falling horse whose mad violet eyes he met right at the ground. He jumped over the rider, who was already dead, and ran farther. One hundred paces.

"Where are you going? Stop! I'll shoot!" Bekeris bellowed behind Senka. Senka zigzagged, evading the shots at his back. One bullet tore past, nearly grazing his ear. Distracted by the deserter, though, Bekeris missed a saber blow and fell. Eighty-nine paces.

A bearded man in a Kolchak uniform hat with earflaps rolled on the ground, spitting blood from his shot-up lung. His huge hands beat at the soil, attempting to grab the Shulikun. Senka slithered out of his hands like a grass snake, leapt up, and ran farther. Fifty paces.

A stray shell exploded nearby; the artilleryman's trailer had slid. Thrown by the explosion, Senka flipped in the air. He fell and shook his head, apparently alive. Thirty paces!

Kolchak's doomed troops swept the detachment of ambushers aside and ran off along the river, shooting more, hacking, and pressuring the Shulikuns. Twenty paces!

Bang!

Bekeris had spoken the truth. There was no reason to fear bullets. If you hear them, that means they're flying past.

No matter what, you won't hear the most important one because the silence sets in before the pain. Senka could no longer hear anything. He didn't even hear the people running over him, pressing him into the riverbank's yielding, unfrozen soil. And when other people ran over him,

holding sabers and chasing the first group of people onto the brittle ice, he didn't hear them either.

And then it all ended. Senka stood. No longer sensing his own weight, he flew up toward either the banks of the Belebeyka or somewhere more distant, to what had once been an unbearable gleaming, but had now suddenly grown cold and placid.

Story 2: “Matser”

Go or don't go? Every home spirit had to make that choice. The one who lived with the Yefimovs, for example, had firmly decided to go. The home spirits he'd run into who'd stayed behind were now howling away in empty cottages, hungry and mean, not taking care of themselves, and already almost indistinguishable from little demons. No, it was better to leave!

Everyone given less than a day to pack.

“Good heavens, is it even possible to pack all your belongings in one day?! It's not as if we'll only be away from home for a day. It's forever.”

“It's possible, it's possible,” said the government representative. “Each adult's entitled to one duffel bag. You'll have time.”

That's how it worked out that there were only two bags for five Yefimovs. Ignat and his wife dragged one, the heavier one. Their sons Sanka and Vanka took the second. And their girl Olkha, the youngest, carried the cat. Well, that was it, they seemed ready. Let's go, you kulak spawn!

Chimney smoke wafted its farewell as the home spirit poked his nose out of a bag – he sure was sorry to leave the house! It might have been old but it was his, after all, warm and well-tended. Where are we going to lay our head now, huh? At the commission they were told only that they'd be taken somewhere to the northern regions. As if the Irtysh was southerly! What could be more northerly?

There was a total of eight migrant families from Abalak: Yefimovs, Kuznetsovs, Saburovs, Babyrins, Uskovs, Mantulins, Fedotovs, and Afanasyevs, but others were added as

they neared Tobolsk, and Ignat knew only one, Sapparov, a Tatar man whose father used to work at the mill.

A horse cart unloaded them in Tobolsk, dropping them in front of a train – it seemed as if they were in front of a fat, dark line stretching east, as far as the eye could see. The cat bit Olkha’s finger and dashed off in the snow, away from the station, wherever her paws would take her. There was a nasty reek of something coming from the train – dead flesh.

“Bring them to the last carriage!”

“Proceeding!”

Ignat did another mental calculation, figuring that if nobody else was brought in by nightfall, they’d be riding free and easy, in a train as long and wailing as sorrow itself. It turned out, though, that plenty of people were already there, meaning there was nowhere to sit, let alone lie down. “Maybe they’ll put us in another carriage?” Ignat heard his wife’s silent question and answered just as silently, “Hardly...”

Toward nightfall, the ones who’d been standing on their feet started grumbling. The Abalak men – who were heavysset and deep-voiced, meaning nobody particularly objected to what they said – determined how to take turns sitting, and they put the children up higher, on the luggage. It felt less crowded...

They set off on the second day.

Sacks crushed the home spirit, who hadn’t come out of hiding. He’d never once gone beyond the yard in his whole life but now there was this travel... It would have been a different matter if it were his own will, in a cart, along an established road – but no! Heaven knew where they were being carried, crammed into these foul-smelling quarters!

And time dragged. Olkha pressed her eye against a little hole in the wall, watching the never-ending trees along the tracks and thinking that if the train went a long, long time, one day it would bring them back to the Irtysh, that's what one of the school teachers was saying.

Olkha just didn't know if everything ahead was land or if there'd be sea you couldn't lay a road across... And if there was sea, then maybe the carriage could drive along a winter road without rails? She'd have to ask Sanka, who was two years ahead of her in school and already knew everything.

Sanka hadn't thought much about geography. He missed his classmate Verka, who'd stayed behind in Abalak. He bit his lip in annoyance, imagining her hanging around with other boys.

As the eldest, Vanka was on an equal footing with the grownups, taking turns and sitting according to the schedule. He slept nearly all the time, though, even standing.

All the more reason the home spirit went into hibernation, noting only the passage of days by the light and darkness between the train carriage's frost-covered boards. On the seventh or eighth day, they laid someone's body on the sack that held the home spirit. And that body was still warm enough that the home spirit woke up immediately. "A goner," he thought. And it truly did stiffen by morning.

Another six people were dragged out of the carriage in the days that followed. Things got no freer or easier after that, though now nothing mattered to the rest of them: they lay side by side, all in a row, groping for their loved ones from time to time. Were they alive?

Finally they heard "we're unloading" instead of the usual "any dead?" People fell into the trampled snow, stood up on their numbed legs, fell again, and stood, chased by the escort guard's shouts:

“Line up! Line up!”

They spent the night in a barrack. They learned from the disabled old timers who lived there that tomorrow they’d go north on foot, along the winter road toward the Kochechuma River. Nobody knew what that Kochechuma was like. Thus far, nobody had returned.

The home spirit couldn’t sleep that night. People who’d gulped fresh air suddenly all started coughing at once, hacking so much it was as if they’d breathed stone dust instead of air. The adults tossed and turned, bickering; the children were restless with delirium, and the home spirit worriedly checked his own three but they all seemed to be breathing normally. “May we arrive somewhere soon,” Ignat’s wife thought in her sleep. “It will be soon,” Ignat answered her.

But they didn’t arrive soon. Another from Abalak, Kuznetsov, died along the way, too.

They noticed the settlement from a distance, because of the guard towers. Harnessed reindeer joyfully threw back their antlers and quickened their pace. They were the first to enter a wide-open gate in the middle of a broad field.

“And so we’re home,” the home spirit realized when Sanka tossed him, still in the bag, into the corner of a large dome-shaped tent that had a small, smoking iron stove at its center.

Of course he didn’t like the new home. In the olden days, he might have been offended and walked out, slamming the door and going to some new residents or at least to some public house where lots of other solitary home spirits like himself passed their time. But he now understood that not everything depended on people. And where could you go here, anyway, to nurse your grievances? There was nothing but snow for many versts. Fine, he’ll make it here until spring, then the snow will melt and we’ll have another look.

In the morning, they brought people out to a plot of land to fell trees. The home spirit stayed to waterproof the tent's seams, make spades for the snow, and blow on the fire in the stove. Everyone had their work.

The supervisor was surprised in the evening: all the tents had cooled but no steam came out of your mouth in the Abalak tent! The home spirit chuckled. The weary Yefimovs collapsed and tried to hug the children from both sides for warmth, but they put the youngest, Olkha, in the very middle.

"Is this forever?" the wife silently touched her husband's hand. "I don't know," he replied.

One day nobody returned to the tent. The home spirit was frightened. He slinked up to the staff barrack, past the dogs, and pressed up against the door, to listen.

"You shouldn't have left them. They'll freeze."

"You'll document it. But I'm not leaving here again until spring! My feet are already frostbitten."

"They'll close the settlement like that, you dolt! You tired of getting paid northern wages or what?"

"Don't worry, Savelich, they'll send more in the spring..."

The home spirit's heart ached. "What am I supposed to do now?" he wondered. "Who needs me here? Will I really have to live off these... killers?"

People returned to the tent before nightfall of the next day. All the Yefimovs, though Ignat and Vanka were in very bad shape. The Fedotovs, the Saburovs, all of them. It seemed like the Kuznetsov woman had two boys – but now there was one.



The Mantulins returned without the man of the family... The guard left the rest at the woodlot to fulfill the plan.

And in the morning Savelich documented two more from the tent.

Ignat stayed in bed. He muttered something, cried about his wife, about his children. The escort guard was no longer coming to the tent: they knew that the saboteur deportees wouldn't go to the woodlot. They'd die off in a couple days without firewood, without rations. Why waste bullets on them?

"I'm warm now and want to sleep," thought the wife. "Don't you dare!" her husband commanded.

Three months before that, two people had a conversation in a high-ranking Moscow office, with windows facing a military school building construction site.

"Some are of the opinion," the office's master said to his guest, "that we're not paying enough attention to northern indigenous peoples. That we're not fully engaging with them when they could be bringing a serious economic contribution to the common cause! What do you think?"

"There are certain complications here... You have to understand that they're native peoples! They're used to hunting and living nomadically. They used to turn in their fur to merchants but now they go to inspectors. They hand it in and go back to the taiga. And how can they be controlled, given what they do there... You can't assign a company of soldiers to every nomad encampment!"

“You can’t assign them, you’ve stated that correctly... We don’t need a nomad army. But what about doing the opposite? Attach those nomads to one permanent place? Build them a hospital, school, store, and village club... And only let them out for hunting.

“That wouldn’t work either. See, they also have reindeer, that’s their main food. They herd the deer from place to place, to graze.”

“Then make an enclosure next to the settlement and let them graze there.”

“Sure, but these are northern regions. There’s not much food there so the deer need a big area...”

“That means it has to be a big enclosure! But the primary thing is to start with the cultural establishments, with the clubs. We need to raise those hunters’ self-awareness, universally raise their level! Get it done!”

That’s what the Moscow boss said. And without knowing it himself, he saved Ignat’s family from death.

The frozen Fedotovs and Saburovs lay in the tent like logs. The Kuznetsova herself had passed away even earlier. Ignat and his wife embraced their children. And the home spirit embraced them, no longer hiding, so his ancient warmth miraculously held the Yefimovs at the brink, not allowing them to freeze stiff. The wife heard him fidgeting and thought, “Go away, gramps. You’ll croak with us.” “Shush! Don’t ask for trouble!” the home spirit scolded her.

And then a red face peered into the tent:

“Hey you, kulaks! Any wood carvers here?”

The home spirit sank his sharp claws into Ignat’s arm, drawing blood. Ignat piped up:

“I’m a carver.”

“To the exit with your things. You’re going to the cultural settlement!”

Ignat began stirring, then rose. He closed his neighbors’ eyes, carried his children and wife outside, and stood next to them himself, reeling. The red-faced guy was livid:

“I said alone and with your things!”

“These are my things, comrade boss. I won’t go without them.”

The guy started laughing:

“Fine, the hell with you. Get in the sledge... Hey, Savelich! Document everybody!”

There was a heated barrack at the cultural settlement. Everybody lived in the barrack: the executive committee members and their wives, the tax inspector and the guards, and then there was the cook and some other people. They found a corner of a storage room for the Yefimovs.

Ignat had only lied a little bit. He was a cabinetmaker, not a carver, though he’d carved various swirls for his hut’s window and door frames, plus he also happened to have embellished little jewelry boxes for his wife, mother, and sisters, and make toys, as gifts for the children. The work at the cultural settlement wasn’t difficult: a club needed to be built for the Evenk hunters in time to celebrate the October Revolution, and Ignat had to carve wood into a small Kremlin, a Cruiser Aurora, and other important things, using pictures as guides.

Of course Ignat couldn’t have dealt with the construction alone. Sanka and Vanka had been taught carpentry, meaning the red-faced man hadn’t miscalculated by bringing the whole family. And so the three of them worked together, hammering the club together before the deadline, by April, when the ice usually starts going out on the Irtysh.

Spring set in much later there but the home spirit followed his old habits and went outside for a stroll on John of the Ladder Day, to check up on the enterprise after winter. Though what

kind of enterprise was this, anyway? Just the taiga all around... No matter where you looked, there were giant spruce trees standing everywhere, caught in the bluish snow. Who came up with that anyway, trees blocking out the whole world for a person? It was as if the land hadn't been made for people... The home spirit stood, craning his neck and gasping.

The sun was rising, painting blue spruces with pink light. The home spirit had to hurry.

He walked past the barrack and then, next to the cultural center, he saw something like peculiar little cabins, covered in hides. Someone was standing between them, too, also wrapped in a hide, puffing smoke from a pipe. The home spirit acknowledged him immediately and went over to introduce himself.

They stood facing one another. Neither was very tall and their appearances were unremarkable, though these home spirit custodians were utterly invisible to people.

The one wearing the hides poked a paw at his own chest: "Musun! Musun!"

He was introducing himself, which meant he understood the home spirit. The home spirit tossed up his hands, though, since how could you explain that our home spirits lose their names before they're born? Otherwise they wouldn't be reborn from the spirits. And now that other one did it again, pointing at himself with one paw, "Musun!" And pointing the other paw at the home spirit, meaning, "Who are you?"

"Well, how can I tell you?... I'm their master. I'm the master, see? Mas-ter!"

"Matser! Matser!" said the other, nodding.

Right then the reindeer lying beside the cabins shied and began bellowing after sensing someone unfamiliar. Musun ran off to calm them and the home spirit returned to his own yard, to continue surveying the new enterprise.

Just after waking up the next morning, the home spirit heard a call of "Matser!" outside.

“An eccentric fellow,” he thought, “deciding to call me that. Home spirits just don’t have names!”

“Hey, Matser!” he heard again.

“Well if I’m Matser, then I’m Matser,” he thought. He went out to see Musun. Musun held his pipe, gesturing to try it.

“We thank you!” the home spirit said, bowing. He realized he wasn’t the true master here: Musun was. And so he behaved politely, respectfully. He inhaled. That tobacco was heady stuff, bitter! Musun waved and said something in the direction of his cabins. The home spirit caught only “tea, tea.” Once again, he said, I won’t refuse, treat me, good man!

They sat by a fire in the little cabin, where tin cookware clattered. The home spirit was surprised. How was it that his comrade didn’t hide at all from the members of his household? He pointed at the sleeping people: won’t we wake them? Not them, they were apparently used to Musun’s escapades so they just snored sweetly, backs turned. Musun paid them no attention, loudly slurping his tea and pouring more for his guest. I thank you, brother Musun, I thank you!

Ever since then, almost every morning – or the opposite, toward night, as soon as everything quieted down in the barrack – Matser went to Musun’s to chew the fat. Of course how can you chew the fat without knowing the language? Even so, it was nice for both of them to sit together as old men do, tell some stories, and find sympathetic understanding. Well and they taught each other a little as well.

The first, of course, was that a cabin or home was *dyu*! A person was *ile* (that’s what Musun said about his people) or *nimak*, which meant all the rest, the ones not with Musun. *Asi* was a woman. A deer was *oron*... And Musun said *aya*! – “good!” – about everything in sight!

And yes, things truly were *aya!* It was getting warmer, like summer, and the cultural settlement was growing, thanks to the efforts of Ignat and his sons. There was a club now, as well as a bathhouse, plus there was an office under construction. And a second barrack would soon be built from logs; the Yefimovs would have somewhere to live as a family. It was Matser who told Musun about all that. Just wait, he said, maybe soon I can invite you to visit me for tea!

They didn't have a chance for tea-drinking, though. Musun had to leave with the nomad camp because the Evenks were taking down their hide homes to drive the reindeer farther. Matser was sad and asked his brother Musun if he'd come back. Musun pointed at the moon in the sky and held up both hands, spread wide – that was how long to wait!

Ignat's wife was a robust woman. They'd barely settled into their room in the new barrack when she got pregnant. Ignat was the first to guess: his wife looked prettier and younger, as if neither hunger nor deathly cold have been in her life. He placed his hand on his wife's belly and buried his nose in her neck, thinking, "It should be in March." "Later," his wife answered, "toward the end of April."

That meant the child wouldn't be born on unnamed land but in Lenin Settlement, since that's what it would be called after April 22. A doctor, teacher, and policeman had come to the settlement via the winter road. There'd also been a promise to bring in barbed wire and a workforce before spring, to build a huge pen for the reindeer: more than two hundred kilometers around, just as the high-level Moscow authorities had ordered.

The doctor delivered the baby the old-fashioned way, in the bathhouse. He chased out Ignat but of course Matser stayed. He didn't trust people in these matters. Thanks to their compassion and silliness, they went out of their way to nurse any illnesses and then they'd cry,

asking why the little one was wailing. That was what it meant for home spirits to be masters of everything in the house, as it had been from time immemorial, so the children would grow up healthy and there'd be peace in the family. The home spirits were the first to know when a freak of nature or feeble baby was born, they'd then suffocate the baby at night so it wouldn't waste away in the land of the living... The relatives, of course, later blamed everything on the woman, saying she crushed the baby in her sleep but deep down, they themselves were glad to be rid of such misfortune!

Matser hid, waiting for the first scream that would make everything clear. The angry doctor reprimanded the woman, "Bear down, come on, do more! What are you squeezing! Is this your first time or what? Push again! Try! Try! Well, finally..."

The newborn was silent. The doctor slapped the baby's bottom, looked on in worry, as if he'd pulled a kitten out from under her belly with one hand, then shook it. Then he set the baby aside on a bathhouse shelf, covered him with a sheet, from the head down, and left.

The home spirit held his fingers out toward the baby. He suddenly felt the woman telling him in her thoughts, "Don't touch, gramps, he's alive..."

What a fool she was! Why would you need one like that alive? If fate wills it, you'll birth more – healthy ones! But this one... Let me...

"Don't touch!" she thought. Then she howled like a wild animal, unable to speak in words. The baby stirred right then. Matser stepped away from him, tucking away his own grabby fingers.

The Evenks had arrived. They were putting up their homes, starting a fire. Matser ran to them, his reedy voice calling "Musun! Musun!"

Musun crawled out of a large reindeer hide satchel, walked toward Matser, and smiled. He saw Matser wasn't looking like himself, that brother Matser was crying!

“Musun! There's *asi* there! *Asi*! She has no milk, understand?” He showed on himself, saying she had nothing to feed the child! “Musun, help!”

Musun tut-tutted, everything was obvious to him and he went inside. He rummaged around there for a long time and growled at someone. He brought out a leather container, gave it to Matser, and also gestured to show she was supposed to rub it into her titties, take it!

Matser bowed and took off for home. The little lad was alive so rearing him was the home spirit's direct concern!

And how Matser loved Vaska later – he couldn't have been more delighted with him. He was clever, a handsome boy, and a worker – one of our kind! But if he'd suffocated the baby back then, who would have been left for Ignat and his wife in their old age? Death notices had rushed in one after the other during one war-time month: for rank-and-file Olkha Ignatevna, then for sergeant major Alexander Ignatevich. And by autumn of 1945, news of sergeant Ivan Ignatevich made its way to his parents. Only Vasenka was left for them.

After that, Ignatov's wife had the thought of showing their native village to their son, to have another peek at the Irtysh in this lifetime. But how would you get there? They had no passports, those Yefimovs. Though Ignat was a brigadier by now and they'd received medals for their sons, he was still considered an enemy. There was one piece of good fortune, though: nobody touched them since there was nowhere to exile them beyond the Kochechuma.



Life changed later, though, after Vasya returned from the army. The Yefimovs were summoned to the executive committee, where passports were ceremoniously handed to them and an Order of Labor Glory in a pretty little box was bestowed on Ignat.

They walked home holding hands. “Will we go?” thought the wife. “Pack our things,” Ignat replied.

From Tobolsk, they hired a cart. The cart rolled along, leisurely, among the birches, rustling the young leaves. Ignat pointed out familiar places to his son: Tyrkovo’s over there, that was the fairground... And Lake Shantalyk’s off to the left, toward the marshes, in our youth we caught leeches over there to sell... And there’s the Irtysh, look!

The Irtysh is a great river, not some Kochechuma. It flows calmly, importantly, and if it turns somewhere, it doesn’t wobble off among the forests, it’s like a wide whip that bends, pulling all the environs behind it.

Ignatov’s wife scrutinized the river and recalled childhood, both her own and her children’s. She wanted to cry but knew she couldn’t because Vasya didn’t like that. She closed her eyes and asked the home spirit, “Will we really end up at home today?” “How could we not!” Matser cheered her up.

Closer to the village they caught up with an old man who was also going to Abalak. They had a closer look and it was Suslov, grampa Matvei, their fellow villager. Well now, there’s joy for you! So tell us, how are you, how are the neighbors? Your house, he said, just about everybody lived there after you left! Locals and people from away and Tatars and commissars! They couldn’t even bear it a month and ran off! They even fibbed, as if – he lowered his voice – your mute wife seemed to have cursed the place... Ignat laughed, oh come on, grampa!

But their home truly did stand as if it had been cursed. Windows had been knocked out, the roof had collapsed in places, and the chimney were crooked... The Yefimovs stood, afraid to enter. And so, well, Matser went in first. And lo, everybody was there! Kikimoras were quarrelling and pulling out each other's hair! Pipistrelles and home spirits were swinging back and forth under the ceiling, all jumbled together. Little demons chased brown rats and jumped on the benches and one of them – what a piece of work he was! – had curled up in the stove and set up a bit of laundering for himself in a broken pot! Well, cheer up!

And oh, how Matser pummeled them... The hut shook, all the beams creaked mournfully, and all the recent residents flew out the windows, shrieking, swearing, and cursing, all noisy and clattering. He dealt with all that in about a half-hour – come on in now, people, and live!

Ignat and Vasya took care of the hut, too, so it was like new by the time they left: whitewashed stove, refurbished roof, and clean windows. They could have stayed there but the Yefimovs had already adapted on the Kochechuma and Vasya had a young woman waiting for him there, she was local, from Musun's nomad camp.

Of all the evil spirits in the house, Matser left just one: the little demon who'd done his laundry in the pot. Matser figured that meant he was good at household management. And now, as the Yefimovs said goodbyes to the neighbors, he admonished the demon in a whisper, "You see to it that everything's orderly. Don't let in more strangers! And if people come here, live with them, grow attached to them, let your heart warm to them! Don't you be offended if they don't notice you. Love them, take care of them. Before you know it, you'll make yourself into an honorable home spirit... Well, take care, lad!..."