

ON A TIGHTROPE

Elizabeth Burton

Arriving in Kashgar felt like arriving in a city untouched by time. Of course, there were modern buildings, but Old Town with its mud houses and narrow streets still looked the same as it did centuries before. Donkey carts mingled with taxi cabs in the streets. Rakhim took in a deep breath from the window of his manager Dao's car: the ever-present dust mingled with the musky smell of livestock that was unique to the city soothed his senses. *Home.*

Dao navigated the streets carefully, taking Rakhim closer and closer to his mother's house in Old Town. Rakhim knew what would be awaiting him there. His mother's corpse, neighbors coming in and out to stay with it until he arrived. Tomorrow would be the burial. The men of the neighborhood would follow Rakhim through the streets to the cemetery, carrying the coffin and wailing, while the women stayed behind and prepared food. Eventually, both groups would feast together in a celebration of the deceased person's life.

Rakhim dreaded seeing his mother's lifeless body. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been angry with him, frustrated that the last of the local girls she had picked out as being appropriate for him had gotten married. "I don't want a local girl," he'd tried to explain, thinking of Alinur and how things had ended.

"Then what *do* you want?" His mother's voice had been thin, as if she were speaking through clenched teeth.

Rakhim hadn't had an answer for her.

As they came upon his mother's house, Rakhim raised his hand in greeting to the next door neighbor, a woman about his mother's age, who appeared in the door. "How your mother loved you!" she cried out to him.

He was sure her comments were true, that his mother had indeed loved him. It was whether she was proud of him or not that gave him concern. It had been hard on his mother after his father died, raising a boy on her own. Even more so, a boy with dreams of spending his life in the air.

As a child, Rakhim had tried to teach himself tightrope walking by stringing ropes between anything he could find, but it wasn't until he caught the attention of a coach, Muhammad, that his dreams took flight. Rakhim left home when he was ten to train with the man, and he became more father than

teacher. He introduced Rakhim to the finer points of tightroping, but as he grew older, Muhammad also introduced him to alcohol and women.

For Rakhim's mother, touring itself was a life of disrepute. "Come home," she would telephone him to say. "Settle down and become a real Muslim."

He never bothered to argue with her. To her requests for visits, he always replied, "Soon," but those trips became fewer and fewer after Dao became his manager when he was nineteen. Rakhim left Kashgar largely without regret, though he was leaving behind his mother and Alinur, the girl he loved. He loved being one with the air more.

He thought back to two days ago, to just before he found out that his mother had died.

Rakhim had been living on a tightrope for twenty-nine days. He ate, slept, and walked on the wire for twenty-three hours, with one hour spread throughout the day spent on the wire platform. After thirty days, he would come down.

It was far from a record—that was sixty days, held by the best Uyghur wire walker—but it felt like an eternity to him. Rakhim had been an attraction for a local bazaar in Urumchi. It had been a grueling few weeks, with an unexpected rain falling just enough to make his body damp and the wire slippery.

He'd lost his balance several times, only recovering because he kept a firm grip on his balancing pole.

Just before Dao had climbed the thirty feet to the platform in the air to give him the bad news, Rakhim had been struggling. The cramp in his calf was so intense his whole body shook, making the wire between his toes bounce up and down. The pole he held went to one side to compensate, and he bit his lower lip to keep from crying out in discomfort. The crowd below him probably wouldn't notice a wobble on the wire, but a cry was something they wouldn't be able to ignore. He knew his body was getting tired, but he told it, as he'd told it every hour for the past two days, to hold on just a little longer. It would all be over soon.

His mother's death caused it to be over sooner than he expected. Upon hearing the news, he climbed down the ladder and collapsed into Dao's arms. "Look at his grief," he heard the crowd murmur approvingly; they didn't realize that his legs were unused to the sensation of unmoving earth.

Rakhim felt the same disorientation when he entered his mother's house. He wished the women who filled the area around his mother's coffin would leave him alone with her, but he knew that wasn't the tradition. Sitting with the body was a celebration of her role in the community, not the family, and

it would have been another shame Rakhim brought on his mother if he asked them to leave. Dao followed close behind his friend. The Uyghurs spoke to the Chinese man, but Rakhim knew that he wasn't really welcome. Dao knew it, too. It was probably his first time inside a traditional Uyghur home.

Rakhim walked around the house, pausing at the small enclosed courtyard that housed the outdoor oven. He wanted to stop, remember his mother standing over the small fire, but the group of people carried him into the sitting room, with its separate areas for men and women. He heard the greetings and answered them appropriately, but his mind was remembering the perfect blue sky of yesterday morning, trying to feel the peace it had instilled in him. He wanted to make his way to the coffin and see his mother.

Finally, after an appropriate time of socializing, the room fell quiet and he was allowed to approach his mother's body. He couldn't remember if he was supposed to cry or not, but tears fell anyway, accumulating on his face so much they dripped on his mother's still body. It was that stillness that pierced him. His mother had never been still; even when seated, she was always on the verge of movement. This stillness was without possibility; it was wrong. He felt Dao's hand on his shoulder and he reached up to take his hand the way

he'd taken his friends' hands when he was a schoolboy. They stood that way for a long minute while Rakhim cried.

The afternoon dragged on for Rakhim, as he greeted neighbors and other friends of his and his mother's. When night came, he felt that he had spoken with everyone in Kashgar. Even the family of his best childhood friend, Abdulvali, had come by in tears, not over Rakhim's mother, but over their son's arrest for attacking an American woman in Old Town. Abdulvali's mother had thrown herself into Rakhim's arms, crying "Why would he do such a thing?" and "He was a sweet boy; you know he was." Rakhim had patted her awkwardly on the back while his shoulder grew wet.

The only missing family was Alinur's. Though his relationship with her had ended badly, it was still strange that she and her parents hadn't come to offer their condolences. When he asked his mother's neighbors about the family, all he got by way of answer were knowing looks and evasions.

Later that night, when the last of the neighbors had gone home, Rakhim told Dao about Alinur's absence. "Could she still be holding a grudge?" he said, almost to himself.

Dao was quiet for a long moment. “Did you never consider what you left her with? You told me she was no longer a virgin when you left. What matches do you think her family could have made?”

Rakhim had thought a great deal about what he was leaving behind. Dao had offered him his first major role, headliner with a traveling company, and Rakhim hadn’t hesitated to accept. He’d been thrilled and had rushed to tell Alinur. He knew by her silence that she wasn’t happy. He realized, of course, that she expected him to marry her, to settle down and live with her in his mother’s home. He thought she understood that this was the opportunity he’d been waiting for.

All Alinur had said was a sad, “You’ll be living your dream.”

Rakhim had kissed her and, as he remembered now, promised to write from each city in which he appeared. But the roar of the crowd, loud even from the air, had seduced him far more than Alinur’s charms ever had. He never saw her again.

He’d wondered about her, of course, about the husband she found and the children she most certainly would have. To think that his imaginings might not be true saddened him.

But how could he find out? “The neighbors won’t tell me anything,” he pointed out to his friend.

“Their silence has told you everything,” Dao retorted. “You have only to determine the details.”

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The next morning, his heart beating quickly, Rakhim stood before the door to Alinur’s parents’ home. His hand trembled slightly as he knocked and he stared at it, astounded. A tightrope walker nervous to see his former lover! He heard footsteps and he took in a deep breath.

A little boy he guessed to be eight or nine stood before him. “Who are you?” His expression was curious, not afraid, as he tilted his head to the right. “I’ve never seen you before.”

It took a moment for Rakhim to answer. Staring at him was a miniature copy of his own face.

Rakhim felt the earth beneath him shiver, the air begin to spin. His vision dimmed and he could feel himself lose consciousness. The next thing he knew, he was gazing up from the ground at Alinur’s father, much older looking than Rakhim remembered. His expression was grim.

Rakhim heard the little boy say to Alinur's father, "...and then he just fell over!" If Rakhim had been able to speak, he might have laughed at the boy's excitement, but his mouth felt like cloth had been stuffed into it.

"That's enough," Alinur's father said. He dismissed the boy with a gesture.

Rakhim could hear his footsteps padding away, but he didn't have the energy to lift his head to follow him.

"I never expected to see you here." Alinur's father's voice seemed extra loud.

His tongue still impossibly dry, Rakhim answered, "I never expected to be here."

The older man towered over him, glowering. Rakhim lowered his eyes and stared at the dirt he was lying on. The wind picked up and caught a bit of it. It twirled around Rakhim's hand, some of the grunge coming to lie on top of his index finger. He made no effort to remove it.

"You might as well come in," the man said. Rakhim knew his generosity was due to the ancient laws of hospitality, not to any kind feelings he might have toward Rakhim. A visitor, even an unwelcome one, must be treated with respect.

Still, Alinur's father made no move to help Rakhim up. He turned away, leaving the door open. Rakhim pushed himself out of the dirt with his hands and knees, feeling as discombobulated as a toddler who couldn't yet control his limbs. He went through the entranceway into the sitting room and collapsed on one of the cushions on the floor.

The boy was nowhere to be seen. Alinur's father sat across the room from Rakhim, his eyes boring into his guest's. "Why did you choose to come back now?"

"My mother died," Rakhim said, even though he knew that wasn't really the question. "I'd like to talk to Alinur."

Her father laughed, its caustic sound dying quickly in the humidity of the room. "Wouldn't we all?"

Rakhim was confused. "Isn't she here?"

The older man shook his head, looking tired. "I haven't seen my daughter since you left," he said. "We assume she's in Kazakhstan."

"But the boy..."

"Was sent to us soon after he was born. He's never known any other parents."

The last sentence was said pointedly and Rakhim nodded. "I didn't know."

“You didn’t want to know. You ruined my daughter’s honor and didn’t have the decency to marry her. What kind of life did you think she would have?”

Rakhim swallowed hard. He didn’t want to admit that he hadn’t known about the pregnancy. “I could take the boy.”

“Yes.” The man’s eyes closed and he sat very still for a long moment. “But I hope you won’t.”

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Rakhim didn’t go back to his mother’s house, where he knew the neighbors would be gathering again. Instead, he left Old Town altogether and wandered down the newer streets of Kashgar, stopping for a coffee here, a melon slice there. He felt more comfortable with the new, the modern; its busy pace distracted him.

While he wandered, he thought. About Alinur’s full lips and how he’d compared every woman’s lips thereafter to them. About the ready sound of her laugh, the way she so often flashed a smile at everyone around her. He thought of the moment he first fell for Alinur, when he witnessed her caressing the family’s donkey, the little beast leaning into her hand with pleasure.

He'd wanted to feel her caresses on his own body, and he'd set out to win her heart.

But he hadn't given his own. He knew that now, was full of regret at what had befallen his former lover. Yet when he thought about his own choices, he couldn't honestly say that he would make different ones. The lure of the wire was still too much for him.

He thought about life on the road, of how a child could fit in. Some performers brought their children with them and seemed happy enough to have them there. But those performers didn't function at the high level Rakhim did. They didn't spend all their days practicing far from the ground, away from any kind of company. They didn't love the solitude. Those performers seemed to get off the wire as soon as they could each day; their feet yearned for solid ground.

Rakhim thought about the boy himself. He'd shown no fear, only curiosity, when a stranger arrived at his door. "That speaks of a fine heart," Rakhim said to himself, ignoring the strange looks the townspeople gave him.

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When Rakhim arrived back at his mother's house, the men of the neighborhood were there, ready for the funeral. He was surprised to see Alinur's

father and the boy among them. “You know now,” the older man said with a shrug. “There’s no reason not to honor your mother. But don’t tell the boy anything until you make a decision. He doesn’t know.”

Rakhim walked next to the boy, whose name he learned was Ehmet, while the mourners wailed through the streets. His mother’s casket wasn’t heavy, and he was able to talk, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. Finally, as they lowered his mother into the ground, he turned to the boy and said, “Do you like *dawaz*?”

Ehmet’s eyes lit up and he nodded. “There is a *dawaz* team at school, but Father won’t let me join.”

Rakhim smiled at his son. “I am a *dawaz* performer; maybe I could teach you some things.”

Ehmet’s head bobbed up and down vigorously. “After we eat?”

Rakhim knew that it would be frowned upon. Even Dao, who had stayed back at the house with the women preparing the meal, would sense the impropriety of doing *dawaz* on a day designed for the celebration of his mother’s life. But Rakhim was determined to make a connection with his son. “After we eat,” he agreed.

The meal and the socializing that went with it seemed interminable. Several times, Dao had to remind him to go back in to the sitting area and hear yet another story about his mother's kindness, her hospitality toward all. No one said anything about her disappointment with her son, though Rakhim felt it in the air all around him.

All the neighbors must have known that Ehmet was Rakhim's, but they said nothing and didn't even give Rakhim any sideways looks. What isn't spoken doesn't exist in Kashgar, he remembered.

When the meal and the stories were finally over and the men were sitting around smoking cigarettes in silence, Rakhim looked over at Ehmet and winked. The little boy's eyes twinkled, but only a half-smile came over his face as he looked up at Alinur's father. Rakhim frowned. The older man's eyes narrowed, but he nodded his permission as Rakhim rose and the boy turned to follow him.

Once they were outside, Rakhim quickly set up a wooden bar along the ground. It was the first step for testing someone's balance, the most important part of life on a wire. He smiled at the boy and indicated that he should step on the bar.

Ehmet immediately fell. He giggled and then got back on the bar, where he fell again. And again. While Rakhim could tell that the boy was having a good time, he showed no innate sense of balance, no aptitude that would translate to greatness on the wire.

When Rakhim brought out an actual wire, strung just a few inches off the ground, Ehmet enthusiastically jumped on it. And then right off. He jumped back and forth over the wire as if he were a girl playing hopscotch. He couldn't stay on the wire for more than a few seconds at a time.

Rakhim tried to remember his own early days in *dawaz*, but he couldn't recall ever being as clumsy as his young son. *He doesn't have the balance of a performer*, he realized, his excitement fading. He tried to imagine how such a child would fare on the road, during the long hours when Rakhim was practicing or performing. No matter how he tried to picture it, he couldn't. He'd imagined himself teaching his child about the tightrope, about life as he'd come to understand it. But this child was not what he'd expected.

Later, as the neighbors were starting to leave, Ehmet was down the street from Rakhim's mother's house playing badminton with a little girl about his own age. Rakhim could tell the girl was winning by the smile on her face, but as he watched, he saw how careful Ehmet was with his racquet, how gently he

was hitting the shuttlecock. Letting the other child win was something Alinur might have done, Rakhim realized.

He thought of her. The courage it must have taken to leave her family and everything she'd ever known. How it must have hurt to send her son away to her parents. He wondered what kind of life she had now. And if she hated him. He'd heard rumors of the expatriate community in Kazakhstan—everyone had. They were mostly political radicals, he understood, and he couldn't imagine them embracing a woman who had become pregnant out of wedlock. Though he was by no means an observant Muslim, he said a quick prayer to Allah for her protection.

"Mr. Dawaz!" Ehmet yelled out when the little girl's mother called her home. "Would you like to play?"

Though he knew the hour was growing late, Rakhim said yes. He hadn't played badminton in years, but he remembered the rules of the game, and he started to play with his son. At first, his competitive nature took over and he was scrambling to make winning shots, but then he saw the disappointed look on Ehmet's face and began modifying his shots so that the boy could make points off of him. It wasn't something that came naturally to Rakhim, but the smile on the boy's face made him feel that the sacrifice was worth it.

When the game was finished, Rakhim ruffled Ehmet's hair. He found himself thinking of reasons to stay in Kashgar a bit longer. But then he resolved that it would be better for all concerned if he go. He thought of his own childhood without a father; Ehmet had both father and mother where he was.

"I'd better go now," Rakhim said to Ehmet. "My friend is waiting."

"Your Chinese friend?" The boy looked up at him, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"That's right."

"My daddy says the Chinese are why my real mother had to go away," Ehmet said.

Ignoring the slur, Rakhim asked what he'd been wanting to ask ever since he first saw the boy. "Does your daddy ever talk about your real dad?"

Ehmet shook his head. "Only that he wasn't a good man. He loved other things more than he loved my real mother."

With his heart in his throat, Rakhim wondered, "Did he say what other things?"

"No." Ehmet bounced the shuttlecock up and down on his racquet. "Papa doesn't like to talk about my real parents. It makes him sad."

"Do you ever think about your real father?" Rakhim persisted.

Again, the boy shook his head. “Why should I? He must have loved those other things more than me, too.” Rakhim opened his mouth to protest, but Ehmet continued, “I know he’d be proud of me, though. After all, not everybody gets to be first in their class!”

Rakhim laughed.

He watched Ehmet’s back disappear as he ran toward his home. And then Rakhim turned and walked in the other direction, very slowly, back to his mother’s house, where he knew Dao would have the bags packed and in the car, ready to take him away.

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