

Selene Calloni Williams

The Scent of the Moon



BACK COVER

Kazimir, Svetlana and Anastasia are real characters. They live in a very remote part of the Siberian steppe. Kazimir is a white shaman with extraordinary power, a healer whose fame has reached as far as Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Moscow. Svetlana is a black shaman, able to travel through the underworld, the realm of the invisible, of ancestors, of dreams, of the soul, and take others with her, on extraordinary shamanic voyages. Anastasiya, Svetlana's niece, is one of the very few shamans in the world who masters the art of both white and black shamanism.

By whoever knows her, or even just heard of her, she is considered a reincarnation of the Princess of Altay.

Selene Calloni Williams and her son Michelangelo have met these three shamans by chance during one of their extraordinary research trips, while attempting to reach the burial site of the Princess of Altay.

To gain the three shamans' trust, Selene and Michelangelo have visited them on several occasions since, even in winter when the steppe is freezes at minus 40 degrees.

One day, Svetlana decided to entrust them with a "tale of power".

A "tale of power" has the ability of communicating images containing new possibilities of thought and action.

In this world everything is imagination and nothing which hasn't been imagined before can happen. For example, how could the first man have hunted the first mammoth, or the first tyrannosaurus have devoured the first velociraptor, if within instinct the image of hunt hadn't existed? In order for behaviour to exist there always must be a guiding image.

These are the images which the ancients addressed as gods and which psychoanalysts define as archetypes: the original forms of all experiences.

Shamans are able to converse with gods. They are bards, storytellers, they know tales able to bring images into existence, create possibilities which were previously unexplored, and thus can solve otherwise insurmountable problems. These are not just any stories; they're "tales of power".

This book tells the story of the passionate love which bonds a boy and a girl, an old man and an old woman, tells of eagles and underworlds, describes the "shamanic journey" and the triumph of love over fear and death. It is not just any story; it shares active secrets, treasures, like magic diamonds which enter the body between one page and the other, between an adventure and the other.

This book can be read at the blink of an eye, the same blink with which the great spirit of the Black Eagle, the lord of the dead, will carry you down to the underworld, to then take you back, changed forever, to your life: it's magic, it's poetry.

ABSTRACT OF THE BOOK AND SELECTED CHAPTERS

1. ENCOUNTERS

Mukhor Tarkhota and Chapaev are two small Siberian villages rising next to the town of Kosh Agach where roughly six thousand people live, the majority of them being originally from nearby Kazakhstan. The territory of Kosh Agach touches four political borders: Siberia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. The most imposing buildings in town are a mosque and a military base.

Mukhor Tarkhota and Chapaev are at a twenty minutes' ride from each other and at a thirty minutes' ride from the centre of Kosh Agach, but culturally the two little villages are a world away from the city. The families which live there are of Altayan ethnicity and language and animist by faith, whilst the people who live in the city, mostly Russians and Kazakhs, are either Islamic or

Orthodox. The latter look with great amazement to the animists' faith in shamanic magic and to their talking with mountains and lakes.

Chapaev and Mukhor Tarkhota are almost wholly situated within a desert, interrupted only by clusters of weeds growing in the dust. In winter there is only frozen snow at temperatures reaching as low as minus forty. Nature rules: glances thrown in any direction get lost in the wideness of the steppe until they reach the surrounding hills, and then the mountains in the distance, crossing kilometres and kilometres without meeting a single building, and only occasionally resting on a withered and blackened bush, the shape of which evokes mystery.

On earth, this is one of the places most distant from any sea, and yet during full moon nights, when the smoky wooden houses become as white as ghosts, rising still in the wind, one feels the scent of the sea.

If you're not a Russian soldier, the reasons which might lead you to come here can only be two: either a desire for ecological tourism, the need to flee the mundane - for here it is truly possible to escape society, the nearest airport or train station being nine hours away by car -, or alternatively the wish to meet Kazimir, known in the whole of Russia as the most powerful shaman of Altay.

Nobody had ever taken notice of Kazimir's exceptional powers, except for the people of Mukhor Tarkhota and Chapaev, who consulted him when ill. Then, one day, a German resident of Altay wrote the wonderful story of how he was healed by Kazimir following a ritual.

Since then, both in summer and winter, every day of the week, a long queue of cars is to be seen outside Kazimir's wooden house, in the village of Chapaev, where pilgrims from all over Russia, and further away, wait to be received by him.

Just getting a glance of him justifies a long journey; it's striking! His face, upon which the years have left their traces, has Asian lineaments; his long hair is held together by a braid. He always wears army-style mimetic trousers, a jumper and the hat of a cowboy. He receives guests in a wooden cabin the shape of a yurt, rising in the back yard of his house, between the laundry room and a garage. A yurt is a Mongolian tent, circle-shaped, with a slightly open roof which allows the smoke of the hearth, burning on the floor at the centre of the tent, to exit.

In Kazimir's wooden yurt a fire is always burning, even in the scorching heat of the Siberian summer. On these distant mountains, in fact, far away from any sea or ocean (although reached by their scent), the temperature changes from minus forty degrees in winter to plus forty degrees in summer very quickly, almost not giving you the time to change the contents of your wardrobe.

Kazimir sits in the yurt next to the fireplace smoking a long silver pipe, his face, lowered onto a necklace of wooden spheres which he restlessly rolls between his fingers, is partially hidden by hat, but just slightly, in order for visitors not to be able to see his face directly when entering the yurt. Between his legs the shaman holds an empty old can into which he sometimes spits noisily. His fingernails are blackened on the edges; his shoes are always covered with dust. Despite his recent professional success and the consequent earnings, Kazimir has maintained the likings of a shepherd, although now he doesn't look after the yaks, camels and goats anymore, but looks after the souls of those who visit him; he is a full-time shaman.

Kazimir is a white shaman; this is how those shamans who look after the ill are traditionally called. In the village of Mukhor Tarkhota lives an even more mysterious character, an exceptional woman, and powerful black shaman who looks after the souls of the dead. She's called Svetlana Valentinovna. She is not as famous as Kazimir from Chapaev and earns much less than him, since nobody from outside the two villages knows her. But for the inhabitants of Mukhor Tarkhota and Chapaev *she* is the authority: priestess and bard for the living, guide for the dead. In the two animist villages no-one takes an important decision without having consulted her first. Thus she is the chief of the entire animist community.

Svetlana and Kazimir are cousins. When I met them it was full moon.

I have also landed on those remote lands attracted by Kazimir's fame, together with my young son, Michelangelo, who speaks Russian and can translate for me, as well as my daughter, Adelaide, a fourteen year old girl who have probably preferred to be on some Egyptian beach sunbathing than in the Siberian steppe.

With us also came Helen, a Siberian girl from Irkutsk who had recently ended her degree in art and was planning to move to Italy to pursue her studies at an academy in Florence. She speaks good Italian and could have helped Michelangelo with translations.

I wished to meet the man with the silver pipe, as he was called by the German community of Altay. And I was attracted by the idea that even my children could have met him, and that that could have been my adventure with them.

Svetlana Valentinovna, the black shaman, would have explained to us how come that during full moon nights in that region of Altay one could smell the sea. It is due to the fact that, in those regions, the earth under the moonlight transpires a scent which humans cannot perceive but on which spirits feed. It's the multitude of spirits and deities which gather in those regions from all the directions of the universe that brings the scent of the sea to the moon, as an offering, in exchange for the scent which the moon herself extracts for them from the depths of the earth. The inhabitants of the invisible world, according to Svetlana's teachings, feed on the subtle substance of things, mainly on scents. In that world offerings consist of scents, since odours are the most precious treasures. Although physically she has never left Altay, among the people I know Svetlana is the one which has travelled farthest. She knows well that the art of travelling consists foremostly of the ability to be light, and thus she started looking to her cousin Kazimir with a shade concern in her heart: success and wealth are too heavy a burden for a shaman. Nonetheless, along with concern, Svetlana's heart had held an unspoken love and tenderness towards Kazimir since their early childhood.

Kazimir Balichinov from Chapaev is also known for his ability to feel illnesses and problems before they show any symptom. While I was queuing in front of his yurt on one occasion, a blonde Cossack woman from Pavlodar, told me that Kazimir had diagnosed her with breast cancer, although the tumour was so small that her doctor could not see it from the echography. She insisted on going to the hospital for a mammography, and thus the tumour was found, operated, cured and finally healed, also thanks to Kazimir and his rituals which allowed the woman to recognise the unhappiness of the relationship with her husband and find the force to change.

The blonde Cossack gave us useful advice. Firstly she told us not to lose hope if Kazimir had refused to meet us, even if he had told us to come back another day for three times in a row. She suggested to spend the time during which we had to wait trying to meet Svetlana Valentinovna from Mukhor Tarkhota, a small lady with great power who could have amazed us with her ability to see deep into people.

We hadn't more than four days to spend in Kosh Agach. We wanted to then visit other places in Altay.

Kazimir had postponed our meeting day after day, always with the same harshness typical of the inhabitants of that region. Every single day we had gone from Kazimir's house to Svetlana's, from Chapaev to Mukhor Tarkhota, by taxi. But we weren't any luckier with her. On the first day she wasn't at home. A woman of the neighbourhood, who had seen us knocking disheartened at the shaman's door and windows, came to tell us that she was at a wedding. On the second and third day the same woman told us she was at a funeral; two different funerals on two consecutive days. Finally, on the fourth day, she was at home.

2. MAGIC

She opened her garden's wooden gate.

She had Asian eyes, long and narrow, but of a pale blue colour. Her skin was very light and her hair golden blonde. A very simple woman, probably just over seventy years of age, with callous and slightly blackened hands.

Her dog came in our direction to smell us. It looked very old; it moved slowly, leaving behind itself entire strands of fur. My blue trousers were covered with white hairs just after a few moments.

Svetlana apologised in Russian. My son let go a sigh of relief thinking he would have understood her without too much difficulty. In those areas some only speak Altayan, the language of the region.

Her wooden house was very welcoming and, judging by the amount of shoes of all sizes that occupied the entrance, I guessed it must have been inhabited by others as well. One thing was sure: they must all have been women, for there wasn't a single pair of man's shoes.

She invited us to sit around a table. In the adjacent room a young woman was dressing a little girl. There were no doors in that house. A big wooden stove stood at the centre of the building. I pictured the shaman, the woman and the child huddling around it during the cold days of the Siberian winter.

The expression on Svetlana's face was stern and distrustful. When we still hadn't passed the gate to her garden, I told her that I had come from Switzerland to see her due to my interest in shamanism and Siberian animism. Shaking her head, she muttered a few words which my son translated: "don't call me shaman, I don't like it."

The objects in that house were extremely simple, but everything gave off the emotional intensity of the person who had collected them and kept them every day since. I was particularly struck by a clock hanging on the wall surrounded by a large frame filled with dried flowers. The people of Altay do wonderful things with flowers, including herbal teas to cure all kinds of illnesses or trinkets and perfumed cushions.

Svetlana, although we hadn't asked anything yet, began to tell us about the funeral wakes of the past two days.

"Two days ago," she told us, "I wasn't at home." "I was gone to speak with the spirit of a local man who had committed suicide." "He told me the reasons behind his decision and he entrusted me to refer everything to his relatives, so that no-one in his family, not even in the generations to come, would have to repeat what he has done." Noticing the amazement on our faces, Svetlana felt the need to specify: "Only by knowing the real cause of pain can we eradicate it successfully."

Immediately I realised that to the village people Svetlana must have been some kind of healer of the soul.

While she spoke slowly and Michelangelo translated with Helen, the shaman kept looking at us through the pale, narrow slits of her eyes.

"But today my task is difficult and I don't know when it will end." "A fourteen year old boy has drowned in a mountain lake nearby while he was fishing". "His friends have seen him diving but he didn't come back to surface." "His body still hasn't been found and since two days I'm trying to communicate with him to understand what has happened." "His family are desperate, the villages in the area are in a state of shock." "There won't be peace for some years to come unless the body is found and the spirit is guided to the light of its new dwelling."

"I'm also saddened", I told her. "And yet I cannot deny being fascinated by your role as guide of the souls and knower of the underworld."

"Yes," she said, as if she had seen deep inside me and recognised someone she had always known, "we have much to talk about." Then, turning towards Helen, she smiled and said "Your hormones are lazy, just as they are in all the women of your family, this why sometimes you're a girl and sometimes you have the energy of an old woman." Michelangelo translated the sentence while Helen was left bewildered. "How does she know about my hormonal dysfunction? It's genetic," she exclaimed, in Italian.

Svetlana Valentinovna wasn't certainly a common woman!

She offered us sweets and insisted that everyone should take two, "since no-one is alone in this world," she said, "everyone has a spirit to feed."

Then she said she had to leave to go once again to the dead boy's house. But everyone, even she, was sad to depart.

Svetlana's seemingly stern and wary countenance had melted to a look of sweetness, and she always stared at the floor, as if scared of making eye contact while leaving us.

I ruffled the fur of the old dog by petting him on the head. Michelangelo asked to go the toilet, which was outside in the garden. We waited for him promising to come back the next year. Suddenly the woman shouted seeing two calves entering the gate to the garden, and she ran after them. When she came back Michelangelo had returned, we hugged her and said goodbye. But before we had managed to cross the gate, she called us back.

"Selene," she said, "pronouncing my name in an unusually correct way for an Altayan woman, "do you want to learn the art of travelling?" "Maybe you should learn it now, without further delay." "I can teach it to you, to all of you."

I looked at Michelangelo, Adelaide and Helen without saying a word; how could Svetlana know about Helen's hormones and about my great desire to know the way to cross the worlds?

We all retraced our steps to talk with her some more.

"I really must go now, but I'll come back late in the afternoon," she said. "We can meet this evening." "Here the days are very long; at eleven there will still be light."

I knew that on the next day Victor, the driver who had taken us from the airport in Barnaul to Kosh Agach, would have picked us up at dawn, and the journey would have been long and tiring.

I turned my eyes to my companions once again. "We'll sleep on the car tomorrow," said Adelaide, who has a joyous ability to make everything look easier and simpler.

We accepted the shaman's invitation.

3. SLEEP

When I read about the mysterious sleep epidemic which had repeatedly affected the population of Kalaci, in the Kazakh province of Akmolinsk, I was particularly struck by it. In Kalaci some people, at different points in their lives suddenly fall asleep while standing and don't wake up for days.

When they do wake up they usually can't remember their dreams, but two boys have claimed to be able to recollect what they had dreamed during the four days they had been asleep.

During those days in Altay the story kept coming back to my mind since all the four of us, although we rarely were actually tired, always wanted to sleep, and if we fell asleep during the day, we found it difficult to wake up.

Sleep was in the air, in the flight of the eagles above us which, in comparison to that of seagulls and sparrows, to which we were more accustomed, seemed so majestic and calm, as if almost possessing a hypnotic power. Sleep was in the little lakes where people swam in bathing suits, far, far away from the sea. It was in the cows and the yaks which slowly wandered through the streets. It was in the magic of the moon which made everything fluorescent at night, and which everything wanted to hold there even during the day, to continue that exchange of scents, that coming together of perfumes which fed the spirits.

That afternoon, while waiting for the evening to see Svetlana again, my companions and I fell asleep for nap feeling that a long journey had already begun.

I dreamt of my grandmother Adelaide, my daughter's great-grandmother. People said she had "the sign", meaning that she had an unusual ability to heal, foresee and even undo love bonds. Sometimes we have to travel very far to find what once was ours but we have lost.

In the torpor of my waking it seemed to me that I finally understood the need of sleep that dominated the steppe: sleep is a small death, and death in those regions is like the moon, it is nearer to humans, doesn't scare them as much, is more likely to share with them her secrets, perhaps through a shaman, a portal between the two worlds. Svetlana is the steppe, I told myself, and the steppe is Svetlana.

4. GATHERING FOR A TALE OF POWER

The evening sun nourishes without harming. Even the old dog, in the evening sunshine, seemed sprightlier.

Only Svetlana was at home, and the fact surprised me since I expected all the family to come together at home in the evening.

The black shaman invited us to the small living room. A red sofa with an excessively tall backrest occupied a third of the room. Svetlana, Helen and Michelangelo sat on the sofa, while Adelaide and I sat on a carpet on the floor in front of them. Since in the steppe the temperature change between night and day is strong, Svetlana stood up to kindle a flame in the fire place and prepare a herbal tea for us made with Altayan flowers hand-picked by herself. Meanwhile, we looked at the cows grazing between the houses through the dusty glass of the windows. The three layers of glass which isolated the windows and the warm fireplace reminded us of the freezing Siberian winter.

I felt embarrassed having slept the whole afternoon and not having bought even a small gift, be it sweets or biscuits, for Svetlana. But in reality, the gift which Svetlana was about to give us was so precious that I could have found nothing in the whole of Russia to pay of such debt. Svetlana, in fact, was about to teach us the great art of travelling between the worlds. As the Altayan shamans' tradition wants, she would have done it through a tale. We were all as happy as children at a theme park, while we pictured the ride on which the shaman's slow and tender voice was about to take us. Some things you just know before experiencing them.

Svetlana told us that the story we were about to hear was about actual facts. She really emphasised this point. "Every single event has really happened and I have witnessed it", she told us three times. But this was of no importance to me. What counted was that Svetlana's story was going to be – I felt it – a tale of power, one of those fables which gnomes whisper to salamanders in caves, and which caves keep for those men who want to listen. The shaman smiled at me. I interpreted this as a sign of the fact that she trusted me completely and was open to us. Then, with an unexpected move, she grabbed Michelangelo's hand. "I am part of this story," she said, "I am deeply involved in it, but I will talk in the third person to make the story less mine and more yours." "Are we agreed?", she asked. Then, without waiting for an answer she began to recount

THE TALE OF POWER

Anastasiya was just a small girl when she lost her parents in the Chechen war, following which she was taken by a social assistant to live with her grandmother in Kosh Agach, a remote village of the Siberian Altay.

Due to the trauma, Anastasiya wasn't able to speak for many years. Unable to go to school, she was taught by her grandmother who, being a powerful black shaman, created a very special school for her, in which the teachers were the stars, the shamanic drum, the flames of the hearth, the eagles and the susliks (small mice of the steppe).

Anastasiya grew up silent and beautiful, so beautiful that, in her adolescence, she was given the name of "*saikhan okhin*", "the beautiful girl".

Just after reaching the age of twenty, her grandmother took her to the never-freezing spring, a place sacred to the shamans of Altay, and passed on to her the first secrets of the shaman voyage, through which shamans are able to cross the Great Threshold and return as they wish.

The Great Threshold divides the visible world from the realm of invisibility, wake from sleep, individuals from their spirits, death from life. Beyond the Great Threshold, in the invisible world, every shaman has a lover, a partner, a *daimon* who inspires him and transmits him knowledge and shamanic powers.

Svetlana and Anastasiya also had a lover from the underworld, a *utcha*, who visits them from time to time. Svetlana's *utcha* was called Num Ärlík Qan. Ärlík is the god of the underworld, and corresponds to the Greek Hades. The term Qan means great, whilst Num is used to indicate at times the sky, at times the thunder. According to Svetlana, the union of the terms Qan and Num with the name Ärlík symbolises the fact that her lover was both subterranean and celestial. Just as Hades is also Zeus and also Dionysus, so Svetlana's Ärlík was from both the underground and heaven, both a husband and an erotic partner, a source of energy, pleasure, inspiration and ecstasy.

Anastasiya's *utcha* was called Rodon and was very playful. He liked snow, snowballs, butterflies and flowers in summer, but mostly he loved Anastasiya's scent anytime.

At the cave of the never-freezing spring, Svetlana taught Anastasiya that travelling between the worlds, and thus flying, involves a death and a re-birth, the taking of a breath in and a breath out, a re-absorption, a dissolution of reality and a new projection or manifestation of it. She explained that shamanic flight can be taken with the soul or the body, or with both, at different degrees of intensity.

She then decided to begin by explaining how to undertake the journey with the soul.

The soul can take flight only during the night, whilst the body is resting. It is then that the spirits guide the soul through the underworld's cave and show it everything it must or wants to see. The shaman, or, as Svetlana called them, the böögiin, doesn't have to do anything in order to travel, except nourishing the spirits and asking them to come and take his soul at night.

Thus, on that day, at the cave of the never-freezing spring, Anastasiya celebrated, with her grandmother, a ritual sacrifice dedicated to his *utcha*, in order to ask him to be, while she's sleeping, her guide in the great shamanic journey of the soul.

Anastasiya's grandmother, Svetlana, had always been secretly in love with her cousin, the powerful and wealthy white shaman Kazimir. Kazimir also hid a love for his cousin all through his life, but none of the two ever found the courage to declare it openly to each other, since they both were held back by the world's judgment.

Until one day...

Svetlana found the courage and asked: "What kind of love do you feel towards me, Kazimir?"

"The same love with which you love me".

"Why have you never said this to me?"

"Because you're my cousin".

"We're all cousins, Kazimir, or rather, we're all brothers and sisters. The whole of humanity, Kazimir, has the same parents!"

"But I've tried to make you understand in a thousand ways!"

"Even I made it clear to you in a thousand ways!" "How many dinners I've made for you, Kazimir, and how many lunches. Do you remember when I used to bring your lunch whilst you were out with the yaks and the camels?"

"But you had a daughter with another man!"

"Because I wanted a daughter and you never declared your love to me. No, no, I should have..."

"No. It was my fault."

"I should have made my love clearer to you."

"We made a mistake, Svetlana"

"The mistake's in our mind, in our judgment, in our fears."

"Yes. There is only one true mistake people make, and that's not obeying their instinct, the spirits, in order to follow their mind's calculations and judgements."

"I promise, Kazimir, that now on I won't fear anymore and will stand by you boundlessly if this is what my soul wants and what your soul wants too!"

"The worst is that we, the shamans, messengers of Mother Earth, allowed ourselves to be defeated by the greatest of demons afflicting humanity: fear!" "I promise, Svetlana, that I will have the courage to love you for all the time I've still to live, with all the force I have." "But I also promise that I will find you again in my next life without wasting time, without deceit, without fears."

"I have a secret word that I use to address my underworld lover. I shall say it to you, Kazimir, so that you may remember it." "In your next life, as soon as you meet me, say this word back to me and I shall immediately recognise you."

"I also, Svetlana, have a secret phrase with which I address my underworld bride, and I shall share it with you now. Remember it, and as soon as you'll have found me again, say it and I shall recognise you."

At this point, dear reader, the two shared their secret formulas, which we are not allowed to know, and the end of that night was magnificent.

Kazimir and Yulian

9. KAZIMIR'S MISFORTUNE

Kazimir Balichinov from Chapaev had lived a hard life. Having always been a yak and camel shepherd he wasn't able to spend all the money he earned. This put him in a state of torment. He had, in fact, a huge quantity of banknotes which filled the box of bones that he kept between the fireplace and his drum – Kazimir had an enormous drum, so big that it covered an entire side of the wall. A *böö*, or a *qam*, as he preferred to be called – since, unlike his cousin Svetlana, he didn't know the Mongolian language – should not accumulate money not to attract upon himself the rage of Uma-no-Uzume, the terrible mistress of the sky. This doesn't mean that he shouldn't be wealthy, but that money is a form of power which should always circulate, and should never be accumulated.

A shaman must not live in anguish and fear, and thus should not save money for himself. He should never ask what will it be of him if tomorrow he were to find himself without money, since his *utcha*, his underworld partner, could get offended. An *utcha* gives to its shaman unconditional love and protection. If a shaman worries about himself, he implicitly denies the *utcha* to have enough force or ability to always protect him. Doing this takes a shaman out of the great circle of unconditional love, and can bring great misfortunes upon him, even the loss of shamanic powers. Shaman must take every moment as it comes. In the fleeting moment they can even be extremely rich, but must not save anything for the future.

If a shaman is in need of a big quantity of money for an important project, like building a house or buying a car, his *utcha* allows him to get a lot of money in a small period of time. As soon as the shaman has reached the needed sum, however, he must bring the project to completion, otherwise his money will destroy him and his family. A well-known practice amongst the people of Altay is that of throwing away any leftovers from a shaman's meal. If a *böö* is invited to dinner, all leftovers must be given to the dogs, nothing can be saved for the day after.

Doing this shows trust in the abundance of nature, of which the shaman is witness and harbinger; it means that one is willing to nourish the nature that nourished him and live without preoccupations.

Thus, Kazimir was living through a truly hard time, since he didn't know what to do of all the money he was earning, and at the same time he wasn't able to give up working.

The shaman from Chapaev, who had been a shepherd for more than half of his life, didn't have great projects in which to spend his money and lived in a part of the world where people do not attribute to money the same value attributed by the majority around the world. If you'd ask a taxi driver in Kosh-Agach to take you from your hotel to the town centre, wait for you to come back, and then take you back to your hotel, the driver wouldn't do it. It doesn't matter how much money you'd be willing to spend, profit has no importance: the main thing is what one wants or doesn't want to do: this is the mentality in Kosh-Agach.

Kosh Agash and the nearby village of Chapaev and Mukhor Tarhota are in Russia according to the rest of the world, but are simply in Asia according to the people living there.

The people of the steppe and of the taiga have based their identity on these two natural elements, on their concrete natural reality, and not on the abstract reality of a nation. This is possible due to the fact that they have maintained unaltered religious beliefs, traditions and extremely ancient ancestral cults: they remained faithful to eagles, to Tayġa Tös, the protector spirit of the taiga, which inhabits the summit of mountains, and to Ötügen, Mother Earth. She provides them food, health and wisdom.

According to Kazimir (and to Svetlana and Anastasiya as well), the world, and all that is mundane, ends after the lake of the Black Eagle. From there begin the realms of the wild soul and all the other possible worlds. But the ordinary world, Kazimir believed, the mundane, didn't extend beyond the shores of the lake, since Kazimir didn't read newspapers, had neither a radio nor a television, and wasn't aware of the internet.

It was the mundane world that had gone into the wild searching for Kazimir, and not the other way around. The endless queues of Russians, Kazakhs and Mongolians that waited at his door had had an important impact on the life of the shepherd.

Kazimir couldn't and didn't want to say no to the people who came seeking help. He couldn't do it because a healer shaman has to be at the service of others, lest he be punished by the spirits, up to point of being afflicted by the same problem of the person seeking help. He didn't want, because refusing to help a person who's asking wasn't like him: it was against his culture and his people.

Between the inability of refusing to help people and the difficulty of spending the money he earned was the hollow space in that box of bones, sitting next to the fireplace and the drum, that kept filling up with banknotes. Hence came all of Kazimir's worries, and all of his nightmares.

On that day Kazimir gave ten thousand roubles (roughly the monthly wage of a master builder in Kosh Agach) to Yulian, asking him to bring to his cousin Svetlana the eagle's leg she had lent him. Kazimir had used it for a big healing ritual that he had celebrated for a man from Moscow, whose heart was developing a serious illness. Kazimir had a bear's paw and Svetlana an eagle's leg. When they brought them together great power was generated. Both the eagle and the bear had lived long lives and had died of old age.

Svetlana had found a dead eagle in the steppe on a summer day as she was picking flowers. Kazimir had seen a dead bear during a nocturnal shamanic wandering. In a dream his *utcha* had taken him to the exact place where the old bear lied down to take its last breath. On the following day he took his car and, brining an axe with him, he had driven almost two hours, and then walked one hour and a half through high grass in order to find the body of the bear. This was the farthest place Kazimir ever went to.

Kazimir had taken the paw and, as sign of gratitude, he had buried the body with a funeral rite as intricate as those that his cousin Svetlana, guide of the souls, officiated for humans. When not using it for rituals, Kazimir kept the paw in salt. But his greatest pleasure was to see it working, that paw, and especially see it working with the Svetlana's eagle's leg.

When he was just a boy, Kazimir often played with her cousin Svetlana in the snow and – as he was throwing her enormous snowballs – she used to see so much beauty in her, especially in those long, blue eyes that shined in her face. Then she dreamt to grow up next to her and be her hero and protector.

"Why are you giving me so much money just to take this to your cousin?", asked Yulian who, like all Kazakhs in Kosh Agach, was always stubbornly wary, even when there was no need for it.

"Because to complete this task you'll have to buy new clothes."

Yulian was left silent. Kazimir's answer was so unexpected that he really didn't know what to reply. His father had always said that shamans were strange people, but Yulian liked Kazimir very much. Hadn't it been for Kazimir, Yulian wouldn't have studied medicine in Barnaul.

At the age of fourteen, Yulian had lost his mother who died of cervical cancer. It was then that he decided to become a doctor. In order to scrape a living, his father had to make him take up little jobs in the village. What Yulian liked the most was helping Kazimir with his animals, as he could ride the camels and horses. In this way, Yulian had the privilege of spending a few years with Kazimir.

The shaman had taught him many things, the most important being that of not considering death and the shades as an enemy. He had taught him to look beyond the common conception of good and evil, and perceive the rhythm of natural beauty. He showed him how to talk to his mother, who was still inside of him, and sing his *qam* chant. Although Yulian didn't have shamanic blood, and thus hadn't been elected by the spirits to be a shaman and have a *utcha*, an underworld bride, Kazimir considered him to have profound sensitivity and intuition, and thus deserved to possess a *qam* chant.

Often, in the course of those years, Yulian had wanted to ask Kazimir how things would have been had his father asked the shaman to help his mother before she died. But he never asked.

Yulian's family was Islamic, like many Kazakh families in Kosh Agach. Animism, orthodox Christianity and Buddhism also coexist in Siberia, but only animists and Buddhists believe in shamanism, for all others it is a personal question: some believe, others don't. The followers of esoteric branches of Islamism, such as Sufis, are more likely to accept shamanism.

Not having shamanic blood and being unable to become a shaman, Yulian was convinced he had to become a doctor, since he believed that to be the profession closest to that of shamans.

When the time to begin his medical studies came, his father told him it was better to give up on that idea since the University was in the big city, far away from Kosh Agach, and he had to stay near his family, his father and his brothers to help them make a living. Kazimir convinced him to go and helped him find a job in the city, at the workshop of a carpenter, a client of his who went up to Kosh Agach every new year's eve to receive a purification ceremony. Thus Yulian had the chance to study as well as make some money to send back home.

Now Yulian worked at the hospital in Kosh Agach and was an exceptional medic. People adored him because he always knew the right words to say; he was reassuring and competent. Yulian often felt that many of his patients would have found more help going to see Kazimir rather than lying in an aisle of the hospital, but he avoided expressing his opinion for many reasons. One of the main motives was the fact that shamanism, in the way he had got to know it through Kazimir, his teacher, was somewhat an elective phenomenon: spirits elect those who are to become shamans, just as they elect those who are to become pupils and followers of a shaman; in a certain way, you have to be blessed by the gods.

"Why on earth should I buy new clothes to take this eagle's leg to Svetlana Valentinovna back in Mukhor Tarkhota?"

"I know that by Svetlana's house you'll meet a person you haven't seen for many years, and I know that when you'll meet this person you'll be happy to be wearing something decent, and you'll bless me."

"Kazimir, I'm always blessing you with all my heart!"

Yulian had guessed that the person mentioned by Kazimir must have been Anastasiya, the mute girl with whom he had horse-raced and played hide-and-seek in the meadows.

She always used to let him find her when they were playing hide-and-seek. Once she had even hid behind a sheep. "How could one even consider hiding behind a moving animal?!", thought Yulian, when the sheep started galloping away, scared by the noisy children. Nonetheless Anastasiya was unbeatable when horse-racing.

"You've made an agreement with the spirit of the wind!", exclaimed Yulian, never managing to overtake her.

Holding the eagle's leg in a little packet under his arm, Yulian stroked Pavlov, who came to greet him and seemed to remember him after so many years. He then opened the wooden gate, walked through the garden and knocked on the wooden door of Svetlana's house.

In the instant the door opened, Yulian's world was transformed forever, and the young man felt very happy facing this great moment with some decent clothes on.

Yulian and Anastasiya fell in love and got married through a shamanic wedding celebrated at the cave of the never-freezing spring. This wedding took the form of an initiation ritual in which both the groom and bride sacrificed something precious to the spirits.

Yulian's sacrifice consisted of a promise to go beyond the rigid impositions of his native religion and culture, and create a syncretism between this tradition and shamanism, for the benefit of both. What Anastasiya sacrificed to the spring was instead her silence. This speechlessness, which for many years had protected her from the trauma caused by her parents' death; it had now to give way to words of love. Anastasiya wanted make Rodon and Yulian the gift of saying "I love you" to both of them. She still remembered her childhood voice.

For many years she had desired to have a *qam* chant of her own and, as she was struggling to remember how to vibrate her vocal cords, the *qam* chant came of its own accord. Anastasiya began to interpret it with a soft and constant humming that rose and fell following the instinctual path of the sound. Svetlana realised that her niece had started making some sounds and directed all her attention towards her, carefully listening to her with full dedication, not even taking a breath in order not to miss a single sound.

The sound came out weakly through the silken veil which covered Anastasiya's head, it was overpowered by the noise of the waterfall; only those who had truly loved the girl for so long could hear it. It was as if Svetlana could hear that sound within her before it physically reached her ears from the lips of her beloved niece. With a sudden movement, Svetlana threw her drumstick into the foaming stream at the foot of the waterfall. The bells attached to the stick of wood and yak skin didn't even have the time to emit a tinkle.

"Noble Yayq, Great Blackness, I offer you the drumstick with which I've many times played my drum and called the spirits, with which I've foreseen the future and sung my *qam* chant. Place your hand on Anastasiya's back and help the sounds out of her lips." "May her silence end today!"

Anastasiya, overwhelmed by the effort and filled with a wave of new energy, had to sit down. Yulian crouched beside her, hugged her and, stroking her hair, moved the veil apart to reveal her face. "I love you even in your silence," he then said. "I understand you without words." But her other lover, Rodon, the invisible one, blew into the girl's throat again and again. Anastasiya

coughed, cried and coughed again, until the sound came out of her lips once more: “mmmmm, mmmm...”.

Dear reader, you must know that Rodon is also Yayq, the Great Blackness. The natural condition of gods is complexity: they are one in many and many in one. Only humans are prisoners of materialism and individuality. Thus, as we get nearer to the gods, we also gradually manage to dematerialise and depersonalise our reality.

Anastasiya stood up with the help of Yulian, but it was Rodon who was holding her up. Anastasiya felt him. She grinned and, with effort, almost as if spitting, she stuttered, in the direction of the spring: “I ... love ... you!”. Then she turned to face those around her and smiled, radiant. Yulian and Svetlana understood that she had sacrificed her silence, which had protected her all those years, for she was now ready to become a woman and a shaman with the help of the spirits.

A rainbow slowly appeared among the droplets of water sprayed by the waterfall

Anastasiya silently repeated the sentence that Kazimir had taught her and which only shamans were allowed to say: “I, Anastasiya, welcome the spirit of the Yayq, the Great Blackness, lord of this spring, for he lives within me, and thus I complete my worldly, celestial and subterranean wedding. May I continue to exist as wolf’s breath in the moon’s reflection, as the outer space, pure and doubtless in the infinite.

The great journey

Following her wedding, Anastasiya learns the art of the bodily shamanic voyage, by which she is carnally united with her guiding spirit, Rodon. She eventually completes the journey with both body and soul.

This, the central adventure of the novel, will bring her beyond the Great Threshold where, in a “transitional body”, called scent-eater, for it feeds on the subtle substance of things, she will live through many adventures with her underworld groom, Rodon.

She will find her parents again, she will understand the truth about their death and will reach the throne of the Princess of Altay to be initiated to the princess’ ancient lineage of shaman women.

This journey into death will turn out to be a journey into love, able to reveal the secret of the union between life and death, winning over fear and realising that all events, whether they happen on this or that side of the Great Threshold, are nothing but dreams, images of which we are the dreamers. In order to begin her journey Anastasiya will have to drink from the never-freezing spring, which kills of a reversible death.

The only way back from death, after having drunk the magic water, as Kazimir and Svetlana will explain to her (for they have completed the journey before her), is to ensure that the heart stops before the water reaches it. For this purpose shamans hand down from generation to generation a sword with which the heart of the traveller must be transfixed as soon as he or she has drunk the water. Only thus will the water cause a temporary death.

Yulian will have the task of stabbing Anastasiya to the heart as soon as she’ll have drunk the water. At this point Yulian will undergo an internal struggle, for he’ll have to fight against all of his moral certainties and all of his acquired knowledge. Yulian, who’s a doctor, will have to abandon all he knows in order to believe that a transfixed heart can be completely regenerated.

Yulian will overcome the struggle and, thanks to the support of Svetlana and Kazimir, Anastasiya will complete her extraordinary journey through which she’ll become a girl, a woman, a princess and an eagle, all at the same time.

In the last chapter the author, her children and Elena, their friend, will find themselves with Svetlana in her house again, sat around the fire as we had left them.

24. HANDING OVER THE TWO KEYS OF THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY.

Svetlana took a deep breath and a big sip of tea. Then, holding the cup between her hands, she looked at us: "I am certain that this story has given you the chance to learn the art of the shamanic journey. Keep it as the most precious of treasures, as a secret key able to open many doors." "I hope you will be able to pass it on to others." "If the time comes, remember to say that the shamanic journey, with body and soul, is a ritual that can take place at any time in one's life, through the manifestation of two images. These images I call *spring water* and *silver sword*."

"The first image appears when, at any moment of the day, no matter what you're doing, you remind yourself that you're dreaming, and that all you see and feel and touch, all that is happening to you, is a dream, a mirage, a magical apparition."

"The second image appears when you remind yourself to live each day as if it were your last."

Having said this, Svetlana said goodbye hugging each one of us.

We were about to separate, and yet I felt as if I never would have left her. That cat-eyed woman who knew how to speak with the dead had entered through my skin and given me a lasting sense of peace.

It was late; the moon was quickly rising behind the hill of the Black Eagle, although the sunlight still didn't want to fade completely.

As we were leaving Svetlana's house, having said goodbye to that hairball of Pavlov, Svetlana gave us biscuits and sweets.

"One for you, Adelaide, and one for you underworld companion." "One for you, Michelangelo, and one for your underworld companion..."

Once we were already sat on the car, a woman arrived at Svetlana's house carrying a small girl on her bicycle. Seeing us on the taxi, the woman smiled. She was the same woman we had seen on the first day when Svetlana received us. At the time she was in the living room, trying to change the child's clothes.

Svetlana, who was standing at the gate waving at us, was filled with happiness noticing the woman.

"That is Anastasiya, and the girl must be her daughter!", exclaimed Adelaide, excited.

The taxi drove off, no-one stopped it. We all knew nobody would have stopped it. We were full and couldn't have taken more in.

Turning back we watched the three women walking hand in hand towards the house, lit by the moon and the sun together.