



ALEXANDER GRIGORENKO

ILGET

THE THREE NAMES OF A LIFE

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS



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AD VERBUM

ILGET: THE THREE NAMES OF A LIFE

by Alexander Grigorenko

First published in Russian as *Ильгет. Три имени судьбы* in 2013

Translated from the Russian by Christopher Culver

Published with the support
of the Institute for Literary Translation, Russia

Proofreading by Stephen Dalziel

Cover image © Max Mendor 2024

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Agreement via Wiedling Literary Agency

Book cover and interior book design by Max Mendor

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www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-80484-125-9

ISBN: 978-1-80484-126-6

First published in English by Glagoslav Publications in March 2024

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Find that which has been lost,
Pursue that which has fled,
Crush that which has crushed,
Slay that which has slain.

Sodeni the Hero, Evenki epic

And seeing all the Hellespont covered over with the ships, and all the shores and the plains of Abydos full of men, then Xerxes pronounced himself a happy man, and after that he fell to weeping. Artabanos his uncle... asked as follows: "O king, how far different from one another are the things which thou hast done now and a short while before now! For having pronounced thyself a happy man, thou art now shedding tears." He said: "Yea, for after I had reckoned up, it came into my mind to feel pity at the thought how brief was the whole life of man, seeing that of these multitudes not one will be alive when a hundred years have gone by."

Herodotus, *History*, Book VII "Polyhymnia",
trans. G. C. Macaulay



THE TREE OF THE YENISEI

I was born on the banks of the river that my people call the Khug, the steppe-dwellers the Khem-Sug, and the Tungus – and many peoples after them – the Yenisei.

Each of those names means the same, “the Great Water”, and one might even say that river has no name. To give something a name is to become master over it, but that river is its own master.

The Yenisei is the Tree on which the world stands.

The tree’s crown is the Sayan Mountains, which conceals from men the abode of the luminous spirits and the souls of those not yet born. The tree’s roots extend to the northern sea, where the Icy Crone shakes her hair and sends into the world snowstorms and death. The life of any person proceeds along this very path from crown to roots.

The branches of the Tree consist of a countless multitude of rivers: large rivers and small, even tiny ones. Each of them means life for a particular tribe, clan, or family, for thus was the world created: no one can exist without his own river. It is assigned to him as his birthright. If it happened that the population of the taiga swelled, then the number of rivers, too, would grow larger. It could be no other way.

The nest of a man on the Tree is where his mother buried his umbilical cord.

His mother wipes her hands, and then the people and spirits who witnessed his coming into the world, will say, “Look, a person was born and will dwell among us.” No need to part from your kin and native spirits, because what falls there right next to you onto a bed of green grass is your fate, and no one knows what it will be.

It sometimes happens that along with one's fate, some mysterious talent is also sent: a keen intelligence, musical gifts, the ability to see the unseen and hear what cannot be heard. Why this is so, is not for us to know. But those who are left without such gifts should not consider themselves deprived, for our world situated on the Tree of the Yenisei was made such that no living soul can be lost on it. Even one who falls out of his nest and is tormented by alien spirits and foreigners, knows that there is a way back, and he is comforted by this fact...

This same thought has warmed my heart, like the warm dust with which I cover my feet. My life was divided into three lives, and two of them I lived alongside the Yenisei. The third life told me that the Tree of the Yenisei is a lie, and I had to accept that fact just like everything that I had accepted before. But I cannot do so...

To do so and go on living would be an even greater lie.

My life lies like a tangled net on my knees. I desperately try to find the initial thread in it, in order to draw out everything that I saw myself, everything that I heard from other people, what came in my dreams and visions, so that I might understand what shaped it and why I came into this world.

DOG'S EAR (THE FIRST NAME)

Catching the wind

They ran through the fir-wood, trampling trees like grass. The earth shook before their eyes. Their young feet and their fear drove them and they ultimately reached a gently sloping riverbank. They were two.

When they reached the riverbank, they stopped, recovered from their frantic flight, and looked around. Then, though they stood only half a pace apart, one cried to the other, "I'll go down, you go up there..."

The second said nothing in reply. Without a word and no longer so frantically, they went off each in his own direction, but they were no more than a dozen paces from one another when a third appeared from a thicket, with heavy but swift steps. He was a thickset man, nearly as wide as the two of them put together. In his hand he gripped a short stick with a lash attached to the end.

When they caught sight of the stout man behind them, they stopped. He went down to the water without even a glance at them. There he examined deep prints made by human feet, as well as the furrow that the bottom of a large boat had carved into the wet sand. There had been a boat there waiting for its owner to take it out today for some burbot fishing.

"Were you headed off on a long journey?" the man, without even looking up head, shouted harshly.

With the toe of his light reindeer-skin boot he rolled a few pebbles into the furrow, but the other two paid that no

heed. They stood rooted to the same spot where the appearance of the stout man had caught them, and they waited to hear what he would say next.

“Do you think that he is as stupid as you? That he stole the boat, sailed along for a bit, and abandoned it?”

Without speaking, the two plodded over to where the older man was. They were tall, big-boned young men, with the kind of shining black hair found in those who are strong and have never known hunger or disease. They had just reached the age when youth transitions into manhood. They were the stout man’s sons. They possessed nearly the strength of an adult, but even stronger was a childish fear that their tender young souls had not yet overcome. Now their thoughts buzzed, like horseflies around a hunk of rotten meat, around the stick in their father’s hand and the lash attached to it.

One of the boys finally spoke. “If he left at night, then he’s already far away by now.”

Their father said nothing. He put his hands, with the lash still in his grip, behind his back – his two hands barely met, so wide was he. He looked somewhere above the forested hill, where the sky was pink with dawn.

“Last night was a big moon,” the second boy said after a silence. “He was afraid to go when you could see anything like during the day. He probably ran off towards morning, when it was completely dark.”

After these words, the stout man turned his head towards them, though his short neck barely allowed him to do so. He was waiting for the boy to go on.

“It hasn’t been so long now, we can catch up with him from the other side.”

Their father brought his hands out from behind his back. “You missed him, you dog turd, you fish shit,” he said quietly, almost peaceably, and then suddenly he took two steps backwards and beat the air with the whip he held. “Alright now, run!”

The two youths came to their senses and rushed into the fir-wood, where they beat through the clearing. The stout man ran after them.

Their encampment was located almost directly on the Bountiful River, separated from it by a few thickets one could get through in a few breaths. But as they all knew, if one followed the flow of the river, then it made a sharp bend and approached their encampment from the other side – not so close, but a frantic person would have to run only for a short time in order to reach the water.

The three of them burst into their encampment. There, next to four summer chums, a woman and an old man sat. They said nothing. Aghast at what had happened the previous night, the woman had abandoned her work. An empty pot lay in the grass. No smoke appeared over the chums. Only a few firebrands still smoldered in the fireplace. They huddled around it out of habit, in order to avoid the mosquitoes that were now, at the beginning of autumn, not so fierce – their season had passed.

The two youths dashed into their chum.

“Grab your bows, and as many arrows as you can!” their father shouted. “Grab everything that you’ve got!”

The stout man did not enter his own abode, the largest of them all. He heard a creak, like that made by the branch of a tree that was battered and nearly dead:

“Where is your bow?”

It was the old man, known as Man-Effigy, who said this. He had lived his life to the very last dregs of it and already his real name was lost, though strangely he never died. He spoke up so rarely that when he did, people started at his voice as at a strange sound. He was the uncle of the stout man’s wife. She fed him, and sometimes – like on that morning when the old man was unwilling or unable to walk on his own – she would carry his light body over the threshold. But Man-Effigy almost never engaged in any conversation with his niece,

and therefore, as soon as she heard the old man's croak, she shuddered. So did the stout man.

"Where is your bow?" came the voice again. "And your spear? And your mail coat?"

The stout man turned scarlet. The hand with the lash appeared from behind his back and crept upwards, though it soon stopped. "Shut up," he said quietly.

But the croak came all the more clearly. "You sleep soundly, Yabto," said Man-Effigy, "soundly like when you were a young'un."

"Shut up!"

The old man laughed. "Now watch out for your pants, be sure to tighten them. If you sleep so soundly you might even lose them..."

The hand holding the lash again rose, and it seemed that in a flash the old man might laugh again, but the stout man's sons came out of the chum with their weapons and called out to their father.

They quickly reached the bend in the Bountiful River and, gasping for breath, stood by the water. For the first time, they seemed to reflect on the fact that what they were doing was like trying to catch the wind.

Each of them realized that the stolen boat could have already passed this way. And also that the person who had stolen it might stop at any spot along the river's long, sinuous banks.

Yet a sixth sense told them that the fugitive chose precisely the way that they expected him to take. All of them – especially the stout man's sons – trusted that the fugitive was yearning for open space, and therefore he would try with all his might to head downstream, towards where the Bountiful River flows into the boundless Yenisei. The idea that there might be a shorter way, namely to cross to the other bank and head into the taiga, was something they did not even consider, because from that bank the lands of the Nga people stretched...

Yabto's fury at his sons had passed, though he tried to hide the fact. He still glared like a wolf and spoke to them brusquely. His sons were the least to blame for what had happened the night before, and as the stout man realized that, he gasped more out of the shame he felt than the running, too fast and too far for his heavy bulk. But the pain, as always happened, only sharpened Yabto's mind.

"We don't need to wait for him here, we'll go further downstream," he said, and the three of them walked on.

His sons knew what their father was thinking: to catch the boat, they needed to spread themselves out. Moreover, at that spot there was too wide a water between the banks, the fugitive might easily escape their arrows. Worst of all was that on a wide river, it was nearly impossible for them to reach the victim after they had hit him. But no matter what, they had to get ahold of him, for only that would cure the disaster that had come upon their camp late on the night before.

Not far off was a place where the river narrowed, the water flowed faster and, if they slew the fugitive on his approach, they could dash through the current and catch the boat. The stout man's sons undoubtedly possessed the strength for this.

At the spot where the riverbanks came closest together, their father ordered them to lie in ambush. They hid among dense willows, thirty paces from one another. Yabto would fire off a shot first. His sons were to finish their foe off if their father had only wounded him – the possibility of him missing was something no one even entertained. The stout man ordered them to hide better, as he feared that the fugitive in the boat might spot their ambush and immediately run away on the other bank. He was smart, this big man... But Yabto realized that what he was doing involved little smarts and a whole lot of blind faith that the one who had brought him such shame was bound to meet his death.

He recalled the fugitive who, just like his sons, was akin to him in that he had dwelt in the taiga. As he thought about the fugitive, he no longer hoped, he *knew* that things would turn out just as he now believed...

The stout man's faith was rewarded.

A boat appeared far off. When one of the sons saw it, he howled like a dog – Yabto regretted that he had left his lash in their camp... The boat was moving surprisingly equidistantly between the two banks, though no oar could be seen.

"He dropped down, he's hiding!" shouted that same son, forgetting all about their ambush. "I saw him myself! Father, shoot him!"

"You dummy!" the other son cried.

The stout man shot off an arrow – the black plume whistled over the river and came to a stop in the middle of the boat. Other arrows followed and fell next to Yabto's.

The boat turned sideways, then spun towards the bank, as if someone had been steering it and then dropped his oar. Fortune was with the stout man. He groaned with satisfaction as his sons dropped their weapons on the bank, rushed into the water, and grabbed ahold of the boat. Yabto ran up to them as fast as he could.

The entire bottom of the boat, its half-rotted wood, was studded with the black-feathered arrows that the stout man and his sons had shot. There was nothing else in the boat.

Yabto stared silently at their catch. Finally, he muttered, "I will go back now and kill the old man."

That night some weapons had disappeared from their encampment: a horned bow, a quiver with three dozen arrows, a spear, a leather tunic sewn with light iron plates, and a knife with a white handle made of reindeer bone.

His sons were right: the fugitive had committed his theft towards morning, when the full moon was behind the rocks and the sun had not yet appeared. That person had got past the small bells they had set as guard and escaped unnoticed.

He seemed much too small to plunder so much heavy gear, but he got away with everything. He even stole the bells attached to the spear and bow. He had anticipated what his pursuers would do.

I was that person.

I only needed the boat to get to the other bank of the river from their camp. That morning I hid behind some rocks and watched the stout man's sons flee, like pale little insects, from their father's lash.

That was unwise – I should have realized that I had committed an unjustifiable act, and immediately got as far away as possible. But I was young and I yearned so much to watch it – maybe it was for that very spectacle that I had decided to do it. I had to hold myself back from what would have been another rash action, namely to jump up, shout, cast off my parka, and lower my pants in order to show them my backside.

A vengeful thought warmed my heart: Yabto was running about now and totally furious, but the worst still lay ahead of him. Some time would pass, and the news of his incredible shame would make its way from one camp to another. People know that anyone who allows a mere boy to steal his weapons is a nobody.

The three of them returned to their encampment at sunset, hauling the boat behind them. While Yabto and his sons had tried in vain to catch the wind, the people of his household had got over the initial shock of that morning and life had returned to its ordinary rhythm. Food was ready and waiting

for the men, smoke wafted over the tops of the chums as usual. Their father, without showing that he had come back with the same shame he felt in the morning, sat down next to his sons in the large chum. The three of them rushed to grab some of the meat.

The stout man tore at his reindeer with short, strong teeth. There was not even the hint of sorrow on his face – he appeared to be merely content that that cursed morning and cursed day had now passed into evening. Moreover, despondency would never grab hold of him for more than part of the day; his family knew this, so they did not wonder at him, but they said nothing.

When Yabto had eaten his fill, he wiped his hands on his hair, then he collapsed, his stomach full, onto the furs set on the floor behind him. The boys' mother said something silly, she asked, "Where is that person now, do you know?"

The sons froze, but their father, who lay there still on his back and stared vaguely at the smoke-hole, quietly replied, "Somewhere in the taiga, just as he should be. He came to us, then he went back. If only I hadn't lost the spear, it was brand new."

The boys' mother sighed and again said something silly. "How could he haul so much back with him? He was so small.."

But the stout man paid no heed to his wife's words. He lay there for a while longer, belched contentedly, and then started and abruptly got up. "Come here," he ordered his sons. He turned to his wife and added, "You go lie down, I will be back shortly."

He stepped out of the chum, stretched and gave a satisfied sigh, and then walked to the edge of the encampment, to where Man-Effigy lived. The stout man barely fitted into that chum, half the size of his own. Man-Effigy was sitting at the hearth, as straight as a stake hammered into the earth. His eyes were closed.

“Are you sleeping, old man?” Yabto asked, his voice raised.

“No,” the old man replied at once. “I haven’t sleep in a long time. Years.”

“Amazing,” the stout man feigned astonishment. “To me it seems like you are always sleeping. You never speak, never open your eyes. Why is that? Don’t you want to see what’s going on in the world?”

“I’ve already seen it all.”

Here, by the light of the hearth, Yabto could clearly see just how transparent Man-Effigy was, like a fallen autumn leaf that retained only its thin network of veins that once held the flesh.

“Your niece says that you can see the future. Is that true?” he finally asked.

“Do you want me to foretell something?”

“I do... If, of course, my wife wasn’t fooling.”

“She’s a silly thing, but look,” Man-Effigy said. “Why should I tell the future when you yourself can? You never come into my chum, but here you are. It must be because you want to tell me about...”

Yabto burst out laughing. “You’re right.” He suppressed his laughter and went on, “You ought to die already, old man. Now is the time. I’ve had enough of you.”

“You had enough of me today?” the old man asked, his eyes still closed. His laughter was suggested only by a twitch of the wrinkles on his lips, that were closed over his toothless mouth.

When the stout man saw that, he cast off his initial affability like a burden that was no longer needed. “Why did that scoundrel get away?” Yabto hissed. “Why did he leave last night? Did you tell him everything?”

The network of lines on the old man’s lips moved like it was alive, and this drove Yabto into a fury, though he still managed to contain it.

"This morning you wanted to give me a beating," Man-Effigy said. "Why didn't you?"

"If you hadn't opened your stinking mouth..."

As if he had not heard that, the old man went on. "If you had just swung that stick of yours, there would be no need for this conversation. You're a fool, Yabto, because you lied to your slaves that they are your sons. Slaves and sons are separate things. Sooner or later each of them is going to find out who he really is. They already know. Did Lar not teach you anything?"

Suddenly the stout man lost his fury. "He could kill every one of us here. Don't you know that yourself?"

The old man swayed back slightly. "Your own son, you can beat him with a strap or that favorite lash of yours. You can beat your son for any infraction without driving him away from you. But you cast Lar aside, like something shameful. You hid him so far off that no one could ever return him to you. Maybe Lar knows nothing, but do you really think that he doesn't realize that he's not your son? He does realize, if, of course, he's alive... The little guy was already right on the edge, I just helped him take that step. What would have happened if I hadn't? Do you know?"

The stout man said nothing.

"Listen, Yabto," the old man nearly implored him. "Listen to me. After all, I've never asked you for anything. Show some wisdom here, don't go looking for the little guy. He's weak, he'll perish in the taiga before you could find him."

"What about my weapons?!" Yabto cried. "Who will return them to me? And when other people find out..."

"Forget about the weapons," the old man continued. "You're a fortunate fellow, you'll find a better spear, and an iron cap and mail, and you'll make a great new bow. And don't talk about shame. After all, you're a brave man, you've never feared shame. All the misfortune, dear fellow, comes down to the fact that you can't distinguish between sons and slaves..."

After these words, Yabto leapt up as if someone had kicked him in the rear from under the earth – he nearly collapsed the old man’s tent.

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Ilget is the story of a frail foundling who loses his twin brother, then by the will of mysterious supernatural forces goes from being a thrall under his adoptive father to the leader of a whole tribe. He finds himself enslaved once more when the Mongols invade the banks of his native Yenisei River, but ultimately comes to realize a truth: the greatest of blessings is to live without fear.

A Krasnoyarsk newspaper wrote of the novel, “The author works with myth like a skilled craftsman sculpting a dugout canoe from a cedar trunk: with powerful, deliberate movements he hollows out the wooden interior and decorates the structure that emerges with coarse writing in praise of nameless spirits. When you board this boat, first your curiosity will be sparked; then things might turn uncomfortable; and you begin to understand that you will either perish or make it to the far shore.” Even more ethnographic and exotic than Grigorenko’s first novel *Mebet*, *Ilget* is imbued with magical realism, based on Siberian folklore and mythology.



Alexander Grigorenko was born in Novocherkassk, south of Moscow, but has spent most of his life in the depths of Siberia. Since completing his studies at the Kemerovo University of Cinema and Photography, he has worked as a journalist for the East Siberian bureau of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (*Russian Newspaper*). *Mebet* is his highly-acclaimed debut novel, and the first installment of the trilogy, followed by *Ilget* and *The Blind Man Lost His Fife* which were published

in 2013 and 2016 respectively. He is a finalist for the literary awards such as The Big Book (2012), NOS (2013), and Yasnaya Polyana (2015). For his third novel *The Blind Man Lost His Fife*, Grigorenko was awarded the prestigious Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award in 2016. He lives near the city of Krasnoyarsk.

