



A KYRGYZ FAMILY OF FOUR OUT ON A FALL WEEKEND.
PHOTOGRAPH BY DEBORAH ESPINOSA.

Fermented Milk

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“Kachkynbai Kadyrkulov needs to talk to you. He’s coming over.” Zina had just taken his call. She looked at me with her, “Who knows?” face. Zina is my interpreter and partner in my work in Kyrgyzstan.

“Now?” I asked.

Kachkynbai Kadyrkulov had always summoned me to his office before; that was the correct protocol. I was the foreigner; he was the deputy minister of agriculture. He cared about protocol, and he cared about not being at the beck and call of anyone, especially a foreign woman.

When he arrived at my temporary working place, a kitchen in a USAID project office, I began making him tea. As the other lawyers in the office walked past the door, they poked their heads in, saw him, and withdrew. He had a reputation for fighting with everyone about everything, and he looked like a fighter. He was handsome in a street-thug way, like a *Westside Story* character who was now in his late thirties. He was not much taller than me, although he always wore a traditional Kyrgyz felt hat, which added at least six inches and made him six feet tall, if you counted his hat. He had reddish-brown skin with short black hair,

high cheek bones and a straight nose. He wore the same, cheap, over-sized suit every day. In the summer, when he took off his jacket, you could see his fighter's body, lean and strong from years of herding sheep in the high pastures of Kyrgyzstan. He despised city Kyrgyz lawyers who had gone to Russian schools and didn't speak Kyrgyz well, so they avoided him. He refused to speak Russian to an ethnic Kyrgyz person.

"How was your fieldwork?" he asked, taking off his tall, white felt hat and placing it on the table next to him. The hat, sitting next to him, looked like a child's paper sailboat with a tassel.

I had been interviewing women about their rights to own land and how they were fairing as land reform progressed. Kadyrkulov had helped me set it up, had called ahead and assured I would have permission to talk to village women without officials present, not an easy thing, even after the fall of the Soviet regime.

"Strong women in Kyrgyzstan," I said.

"Nomads. I told you our women are really in charge of the family. We just pretend it's the men."

We talked for a while about my findings. The inheritance law, which was modeled after United States and Western European law, was not followed, and it would have been bad for women if it had been. In Kyrgyz tradition, the youngest son gets the parents' house and land, and also the parents. Women said that if the land were divided up as the inheritance law required, they would have no one to care for them. None of their children would earn enough on their small plots of land to support them. They liked their traditional law. It worked. Widows didn't own land, but their sons did; and the sons cared for their mothers. It was a much better arrangement, they thought.

Kadyrkulov appreciated my willingness to consider the Kyrgyz tradition as valuable and preferable to Western legal rights.

"None of the women we interviewed liked the practice of polygamy, though," I said.

Kyrgyzstan is an Islamic country, but people follow Islamic rules imprecisely. Polygamy, allowed in the Koran, is common in rural areas, for example, but the requirement to treat both wives equally has been dropped from the Kyrgyz version of the rules. It's hard to say whether I was testing him or whether I felt a need to show him that all customs weren't good for women, or whether I had become used to arguing with him and wasn't prepared to stand on the same side so easily.

He nodded. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

I waited. Whatever my intention, it had worked.

"You know my wife is sick," he said. "She has a heart condition. She cannot have any more children; that's why we have only one daughter."

I knew this was a big problem. Traditionally, no word for "daughter" existed in Kyrgyz. The word for children was also the word for sons. If for some reason you can't have a son, you have to get one from somewhere—a brother's son if he has two, a cousin's son, or a second wife. Women who bore no sons bore the blame. For the women we interviewed, this was the only acceptable reason for a husband to take a second wife—no sons.

"I had to take a second wife. The elders wouldn't let me refuse anymore," he said.

Zina looked at me. "He's apologizing, kind of, yeah?" she said in English. "He thinks you think he's progressive, and you did this field work, and he knows I probably told you about his second wife anyway, yeah?" Although it sounded like she was mocking him for a minute, she added, "He had to take a second wife; he didn't have any sons."

"Are you saying that or did he say that?" I asked her.

"He said it, and now I'm telling you it's true." Zina had never defended him before. It seemed like such an odd moment to do so. She had been with me during all the

field interviews. She had heard women complain about polygamy fiercely or talk about it quietly if their husband took a second wife because they had not had sons. Women felt shame for not having sons.

"You know I love my wife. I didn't steal her; she wanted to marry me. But she was sick. The aksakals—elders, literally, "white beards"—had a meeting, and they chose Rosa for me. She's from the south."

The southern Kyrgyz were quite different from the northern Kyrgyz, and they generally did not get along. He would never have chosen a southerner—he was offering me proof that he had been forced into this second marriage.

"Did you have a boy?" I asked.

"Yes, a girl first and now a boy. He's six months old."

"Congratulations." I was genuinely glad for him.

"Neither of my wives is ever happy with me." He looked miserable.

The last time I was in Kyrgyzstan, we had gone to dinner and had dropped him off at a house in town. That was probably her house, the second wife. He lived way out of town with his first wife. I wondered at the time. It was a Thursday. Thursday is the day mistresses make plov for their lovers, traditionally. Thursday is boy's night out.

He got up to leave, putting his hat back on. "*Chong rak-hmat*," he said as he shook my hand. Big thanks. Zina and I remained in the lunchroom long after he left and dissected the meeting piece by piece. We analyzed why he thought he should tell me. We analyzed why he cared what I thought. We analyzed the truth or falseness of his claim that he had to marry a second wife. We analyzed why he told me that he was forced, regardless of its veracity. We analyzed the choice of a southerner.

Zina's interpretation of the meeting was this: He knew I would find out about his second wife because the entire country of Kyrgyzstan is like a small town, and he was a known figure. He knew Westerners don't like polygamy

because they don't practice polygamy. He knew I would take the side of women after interviewing them, and he knew women don't like polygamy. He wanted to explain because he cared what I thought. That was the part she couldn't believe. That was the part she was suspicious about. "Why would he care?" she said in disgust, which I could have taken badly, except it was Zina.

"Did you promise him a trip to the States?" she asked.

"No. Never." I said.

"Does he think the United States is going to give him money?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I don't know why he would."

"He surely is the only Kyrgyz man like him," she said with some respect. "But I don't trust him," she added.

"What do you think about him having two wives?" I asked her.

Zina is a city Kyrgyz and looks and dresses like Honey in the *Doonesbury* cartoon strip. Although she speaks Kyrgyz well from having spent summers in the pastures, Kadyrkulov corrected her sometimes, and told me in Russian that her Kyrgyz is "a nightmare." The city Kyrgyz often look down on the rural Kyrgyz for their lack of savvy. Zina has never known what to make of Kadyrkulov. Although he's a rural Kyrgyz man, he laughs at his rural ways while making no apologies for them. He calls himself "Uncle Pumpkin," after the character in the Soviet Era Cipollino children's story. Zina calls herself a marginal because she feels part of her Kyrgyz culture and an outsider at the same time. She always surprises me. Once she told me all the good things that Stalin had done for Kyrgyzstan, "civilizing" it and bringing art houses to every village.

"I think he had to take a second wife and have a son. I'm just glad he had a son, finally. His first wife is spoiled, anyway," she said, "with that heart," she added.

“Maybe you should have him speak at the women-and-land conference. It would be good if he would say good things about your work—since he’s a real Kyrgyz man, yeah?”

I thought this was a good idea. Kachkynbai Kadyrkulov is a “real Kyrgyz,” because he knows Kyrgyz history, speaks the Kyrgyz language, bringing back phrases and words lost after the Soviet invasion, can name ten generations of ancestors even though the requirement is only seven, eats sheep’s head—eyes and all, and loves fermented mare’s milk, which is always served with black things that float around, unnamed and unexplained. He grew up as a shepherd but became one of the main architects of the rural land reform that occurred after independence in 1991.

For the first few years of knowing him, we worked on writing legislation that would help fairly distribute the land owned by the state on collective and state farms. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan, a miniature country in Central Asia, was the last to declare independence. When it did declare independence and the USSR farm subsidies ceased immediately, all 4.5 million people descended into poverty and chaos. The Kyrgyz were nomads before the Russians forcibly settled them on farms in the early part of the 20th century, and they have no resources except the water that flows from their mountains; but water is not like oil; water gives itself away. And they have sheep.

The Russians were masters at making the conquered countries dependent on one another to function. There were no wool-processing plants in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz wool had to be sent out to be processed in a country with no sheep. Kyrgyzstan was never meant to be a farming country—only seven percent of the land is below 3,000 meters. Without subsidized fertilizer and tractors and herbicides and irrigation and markets, the Kyrgyz farms quickly deteriorated. Giving people their own land and whatever was left of farm implements was the only way people would survive.

The foreign donors all loved Kadyrkulov because he was passionate about land reform and passionate about breaking up the collective farms. He surprised them by how smart he was, even though he did not speak English. Usually when a “local” does not speak English, he is banned by the foreign community from meetings or positions of authority in their programs. But Kachkynbai had not agreed to be sidelined. Kadyrkulov’s support would carry a lot of weight. I felt pleased with myself, like I had bridged this enormous cultural gap, won a friend, a male friend.

Kadyrkulov agreed to give the opening speech at the presentation about the findings of the fieldwork. I went through my findings with him. Divorced women were generally sent home to their mothers, with nothing but their children and their clothes; domestic violence was common, and women didn’t feel like they could leave their husbands because they would have no economic support and no job. Most women believed being beaten by their husbands was normal; women did the physically challenging work of weeding and picking cotton but received no pay for this work; women used their household plots to feed their families, but this work had to be done by them alone and on top of their other work in the family field. While women and men generally made decisions together and worked together in the field, women lived harder lives than men. They had responsibility for all the housework, childcare, garden, fuel collecting and physical labor in the field, while men were only needed to drive the tractor.

The day of the presentation, Kadyrkulov stood up to introduce me. He nodded toward me and welcomed the lovely ladies in the audience and me, the lovely speaker from the United States. He gave a speech about the equality between Kyrgyz men and women, about women being the real leaders, even though men have all the rights, about the Kyrgyz not thinking in terms of women and men, about

the wrongness of talking about women separately or about thinking of women separately. He sat down.

All I can say is thank god for the Communists who encouraged women to speak out, to take public office, to participate. Before I could even think about how to proceed, women in the audience, who had grown up under the Communist system and were now parliamentarians, stood up and booed. They yelled at him.

"We're tired of hearing that. That's not what she" meaning me—"heard from Kyrgyz women." Zina translated.

Then, he laughed. He was arguing back, but he was laughing. The women were mad, but they, too, were laughing. They were laughing at each other's ridiculous beliefs. I didn't understand anything, and Zina was too involved in the drama to translate after the laughing began. But, I could see that they were taunting and teasing each other like siblings. Other men joined in, they all stood in front facing the women in the back. They were throwing their arms around and yelling, looking furious and then listening and laughing. Then it was over.

"They said, 'Bullshit,'" Zina translated.

"Who?"

"Both sides," she said. "Go ahead, give your speech."

From that day on and for the next eight years of working in Kyrgyzstan, on every one of my visits Zina brought up her disappointment in the way Kadyrkulov behaved that day.

"Remember when he gave that awful speech in front of all those people. I knew you shouldn't trust him," she would say after every meeting with him.

"He doesn't even know how stupid he sounded, and he still thinks he's right. He's so stubborn," became Zina's mantra.

I admit we are unlikely friends. He has made me cry, and I have made him angry. We have disappointed each other repeatedly. I helped him win a prestigious grant and got him on the World Bank Web site, in his old suit and white

felt hat, with James Wolfonson. He insisted on wearing a plain white kolpak (hat) instead of a fancy one with black embroidery and felt inside, when we visited Washington D.C. together, because shepherds wear plain kolpaks, an utterly meaningless act to anyone but himself.

He teaches me about the complicated business of being male in a culture that promotes stealing an unwilling woman to be your bride and a national game, kokboru, a game of polo played with a dead goat and often resulting in at least one lost eye or death. About the Tour de France, he said, "You call that a sport? Bicycle riding?" and laughed.

But sometimes he brings me flowers in the morning.

"Always carnations," Zina says. "Never fuscias."

And I bring him parts for his chain saw and the latest gadgets.

When Kadyrkulov's first wife died of a heart attack, he invited me to come and visit her grave, after the first 40 days, in his home village five hours away. He introduced me to his mother and some of his 13 siblings. We sat on the floor in the circle—Zina and me, him, his mother, his daughter, and other women who were related to him—waiting for one of his sisters-in-law to serve us soup to start the required meal. We made conversation, but it was nearly impossible to know what to say. Suddenly, a woman came in, dropped a bucket of milk in front of him and started screaming at him in a horrible, unreal voice.

"You did this to me. I hope you're happy. Look at me. You ruined me."

"She's not right," Zina said to me quietly, and then translated some of her rant. Even not understanding her words, her voice had the quality of lunacy. She stood there, facing him, screaming, repeating the same thing over and over. Kadyrkulov's daughter started to cry. One of the women stood up and led his sister out of the room. Another woman picked up the bucket.

Later as we stood at his wife's grave, he said without introduction, "I made her get married instead of letting her move to Bishkek to go to the university, because someone needed to stay and take care of our mother. She blames me. All my sisters blame me. She wanted to be a librarian."

"Who takes care of your mother?" I said, concerned about logistics, which were easier to think about than complicated relationships.

"Another sister takes care of both of them," he said. He did not say he regretted his choice, nor did he seem uncomfortable with what had happened. "They couldn't all leave," he said.

So he had chosen this sister. There was no question his mother had to live with a sister. Her youngest son, Kennynbai, had to go to the city for education. Staying in the village had been a huge sacrifice for her. She literally lost her mind there.

Everyone I know who has worked with Kadyrkulov has decided he is too much, and he has fallen out of favor with foreigners. He has written letters condemning them for their sheep project and their farmer-extension-services project. He has not pretended to go along, and he has never pretended to be anything but a Kyrgyz nationalist who believes in and respects traditional Kyrgyz ways more than any human being. He does not agree with me on many issues, including that men and women should have equal opportunities—equal opportunities to choose their spouses or to go to the university. I have seen what this attitude can do to women. I have known women who were bright and capable, stolen when they were still in college, married to someone they did not know or love, and kept at home from that moment onward. Zina says that good customs and bad customs intermingle, like clasped hands. If you start cutting out the bad, you end up with something that's not workable.

Drinking out of the cup that is Kachkynbai Kadyrkulov, I'm always going to find junk floating in it and residue at the bottom of the cup, stuff I don't want to swallow. Even if we can both quote whole passages from *The Little Prince*, even if we like each other's company, even if he teaches my daughter to draw mountain lions, even if we make each other laugh, can I accept that he is part of the problem I want to help solve? Not to drink is to miss out on friendship and knowledge. But, to drink, well, to drink is to accept what's in the cup.



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SHARES LUNCH WITH A KYRGYZ FAMILY.
PHOTOGRAPH BY DEBORAH ESPINOSA.