

TWO KYRGYZ WOMEN



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Last, but not least, the numerous victims of trafficking I spoke with in the IOM shelter for victims of human trafficking.

*O, beautiful liberty, dear and sweet,
Thou heavenly gift where riches all meet,
Actual source of our glory of these hours,
The sole adornment of this grove of ours,
All silver, all gold, and our lives so dear,
Cannot recompense thy beauty so clear.*

Ivan Gundulic (1589-1638)

In memory of my grandmothers Mara and Lucija

Foreword

We live in a globalizing world. Distances and cultural diversity are not obstacles to us any more. Places once difficult to reach before are no longer inaccessible. Even the food we like to eat at home can be shipped to most parts of the world. In a world without barriers, our curiosity has no limits. The freedom of movement widens our horizons and shrinks impossibility. In the global world, we can be at home anywhere. When doing business, when vacationing, when flying, when resting, the laws are there to protect us and the media speaks languages we understand.

But, there are *others*. There are millions of people for whom the globalized world and technology have brought no changes. Their daily bread still depends on harvest. Their daily water still depends on rain. They have no access to the internet and they glean information from family, friends or neighbors, from newspapers, or from a billboard. Globalization for them is merely a foreign brand of a soft drink on the table.

In the vastness of the migrating world, while some people move freely, others become victims of human trafficking. This book is about such people. It is about two Kyrgyz women whose problems are both uniquely Kyrgyz and universal. Their destinies are captured in a specific moment in Kyrgyz history: following the break up of the Soviet Union and during the painstaking process of transition towards democracy and a market economy. Their stories are snapshots of not only their lives during this period but also of traditional Kyrgyz society, which has endured dramatic changes affected by the vulgar materialism and moral erosion in the post-Soviet era.

The two stories, *Ainura's Journey* and *Life Is More Unpredictable Than Fiction*, are based on the testimonies of two Kyrgyz women, Ainura, a victim of trafficking for forced labor and Gulia, a victim of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. They shared their experiences with me during our meetings in different places, from the IOM shelter to a shopping mall. They wanted their stories to be heard in order to contribute to the fight against human trafficking, a crime that transformed them from ordinary family people into traumatized

victims. Knowing that their stories would be written in English, the two women also wanted to share with foreign readers details of their traditions, family values, hopes and fears. Most of all – they wanted to tell us about the difficult lives of women in a remote and impoverished Central Asian country.

Ainura's and Gulia's mother tongue is Kyrgyz, but we communicated in Russian, with only occasional help of a translator for Ainura. We communicated effortlessly. Our determination to understand each other bonded us in friendship, and we made the most of our limited vocabulary. The particular descriptions of traditions as well as the metaphor usage in the two stories were expressed within the limits of the writer's freedom.

I hope that the voices of these two women will be heard and will contribute to the fight against human trafficking.

Marinka Franulovic, Author

Imagine yourself in the position of a victim of trafficking. You heard about an opportunity – a job that would pay more, a chance to go to another country, a start towards a better life.

Perhaps someone you trusted – a family member, a neighbor, a friend of a friend – offered to help you get there. Imagine that when you arrived your travel documents were taken, your every movement controlled and monitored. Imagine that you were forced to work in dangerous conditions for little or no pay. What if you realized that your transport, food and shelter had become a debt that was increasing every day that you could never pay off?

What would it be like to be physically, emotionally and sexually abused while being trapped in this situation? What would it be like to have no passport or other legal documents and no money, in a country where you don't speak the language and know no one, and are too scared or don't know where to look for help? What would it be like to be treated like a commodity, to be bought and sold?

Brunson McKinley, IOM Director General

AINURA'S JOURNEY

1. Bishkek

Ainura was sitting on a dark and massive sofa as she breastfed her eight-month-old baby boy during my first visit to the IOM shelter. From the moment we introduced ourselves, the boy, already content and full, played with his mommy's nipple. With sincere openness, the young woman greeted me in Russian. Ainura accepted with a proud smile my heartfelt compliment of how cute and strong her boy was, and although I did not ask their ages, she volunteered that he was eight months and that she was twenty six.

Ainura looked the way young Kyrgyz women from the countryside usually look; she wore an oversized and over-washed yellow shirt, her long dark hair was gathered in a ponytail, and her skin was as red as a ripe Osh tomato, which many southern Kyrgyz families grow for a living. The harsh Central Asian summer and its uncompromising sun left on her face merciless and obvious proof that much of her recent life had been spent outside. Our small talk quickly revealed the limits of Ainura's Russian. When our common language reached a cul-de-sac, we could only smile and gesture. To get to know Ainura better I needed someone to translate from Kyrgyz to Russian.

If you step out of this Soviet-style building, a place which used to be a hospital and is now a shelter for victims of domestic violence and human trafficking, you will find yourself in the center Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic. Outside, traffic is hectic. Every day the city's car population seems to multiply, consisting mainly of retiree's from European or Japanese roads and highways. Among the Soviet leftovers and other oldies, however, speed noticeably expensive new cars with tinted windows, driven for the most part by paid drivers. These road sharks often run red lights and generally do not follow traffic rules.

Some may be on the way to the luxurious, newly-opened Vefa Center, a shopping mall located just two *marshrutka* (mini-van) stops from the shelter where we left Ainura and her baby. The brightly painted three-storey Vefa building has everything to qualify it as a smaller version of a real shopping mall. A European-style cafe in the atrium serves elegant desserts along with fine tea and coffee. One may visit a food court offering a sushi bar, Mongolian barbeque, and Turkish and Italian restaurants. It also tempts visitors with a movie theater selling popcorn and showing American movies, and the luxury shops lined with neat shelves serve as eye candy for the fashionable and carefree young people who mill about.

The shopping mall is a nice convenience, not only for the new Kyrgyz rich who no longer have to drive to Almaty for basic designer wear, but also for the many window-shoppers, who may indulge their eyes, ears, and noses for free or even come in to warm up a little bit if the city shuts off heat to apartment radiators in the middle of winter. Inside the retail shops, attractive salespeople sell \$300 shoes, while earning monthly salaries of (United States Dollars) \$50, handling each pair with the respect one may give an expensive car. No wonder, \$300 is six months' salary.

Three hundred meters from the \$300 shoes resides the IOM shelter. And there, on a deep sofa, sits Ainura with her son, Ali. Just as the translator arrives, Ali wets himself. He is wearing no diapers. Ainura changes his clothes very quickly, washing and hanging them immediately with such deftness that one wonders whether she is faster than mothers who use commercial diapers. Ali was fidgety but his mother was calm, curious and ready to start the conversation with me.

I asked Ainura, a village girl from the south, if she liked her country's capital, Bishkek. The question about the city soon brought up memories of Ainura's first paid working experience in Bishkek. Ainura lived here seven years ago when she was 19 after finishing school in her provincial town. In Ainura's hometown her aunt, a hardworking woman, taught little Ainura how to sew. The rural aunt was connected to an urban aunt who knew that a sewing factory in Bishkek needed workers and thought this may be a good opportunity for Ainura.

The family agreed that this was the best course, as Ainura would acquire a solid profession with which she could support herself while helping her family.

Ainura's aunt in Bishkek was a busy woman, who worked in a hospital as a gynecologist. She was married and had her own family: two small children and a working husband. The Kyrgyz family network is typically very strong, and the aunt willingly invited her country niece to live with them. It was only to be for a short time.

Ainura was hired in June to work until September. This is usually the time of year when Bishkek families avoid the city heat by vacationing at Lake Issyk Kul or spending time picnicking and barbequing *shashlik* amid the cooler mountains of Ala Archa National Park. But this particular summer, Ainura's aunt's family was too busy to afford time at any of these places. At least with Ainura in the apartment, they did not have to think about the cleaning or childcare for their small children.

The aunt's family lived in a two-room Soviet block apartment. A two-room Soviet apartment is one of many cramped spaces in a large gray building, much like a giant bee-hive filled with people instead of honey. Summer temperatures in the city may reach 40 degrees Celsius and Ainura, who spent most of her life in open space, did not like living in this concrete jungle. Such heat only aggravated her and other tenants' usual fatigue and frustration. Ainura was grateful to her aunt and her family for the favor of having her, but she decided that she much more preferred the rural life of southern Kyrgyzstan than the one they had in city apartments.

The sewing factory where Ainura worked was located in a suburb of Bishkek, and she needed to wake up early in the morning to commute to the factory. Once there, she started her job by connecting selected pieces of material for patchwork cushions. Ainura loved the final outcome of the sewing process – the fact that the mending together of those singularly insignificant pieces of fabric can make something useful and beautiful. The young woman was always delighted with the feeling that her hands were such powerful and creative tools.

Unfortunately, Ainura did not see much of the city at all. Her aunt was strict and limited all Ainura's movements apart from going to the factory. The aunt told her young niece that it was better for her not to go anywhere, because she could find only bad company in the big city and get into unnecessary trouble. By the end of the summer, Ainura left Bishkek without knowing the name of its main square.

She did not have the opportunity to see the White House, the National Opera and Ballet Theater, or any theaters for that matter. Ainura never even walked through the pleasant, tree-lined Erkindik Park, where during summer people refresh themselves with ice-cream and popular fermented drinks. In spite of this, Ainura was happy. She had a job with fixed hours and a regular, though meager, salary. On payday, Ainura would go to a little teashop nearby with her colleagues, where the group would partake in a humble feast of *manti* (meat-filled dumplings) and green tea, sharing gossip and the warmth of friendship. Ainura's aunt did not ask for rent, and Ainura even managed to save a little to bring back home to her family in Uzgen. By summer's end, Ainura was already back home.

2. Uzgen

In her village, the young woman did not have a sewing machine, and her family could not afford one. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ainura's parents lost their stable jobs at the *kolkhoz* (farming cooperative), which sustained them with a monthly income. Since then, they had remained solidly unemployed. The family land they owned provided the food they ate, but apart from grains and vegetables, there was no cash crop from which they could earn money.

The sewing factory near her town had closed as well. Ainura wanted to work somewhere, and soon after she came home, an opportunity materialized. Ainura heard about a job in the town bazaar's eatery. They needed a hard-working person to cook. Ainura was happy with this, and she fully expected her family to allow her to take this job. Ainura's family did in fact agree, as the young girl needed to learn how to cook properly since she was already of marriageable age. This marriage loomed closer in Ainura's future than she could have ever

imagined, as it was precisely in the bazaar diner that she met her future husband, Ulan.

While working in the eatery, Ainura noticed that a group of young men started coming regularly to the cafe, and one of them seemed particularly fond of her. She liked him and was flattered by his interest, although his friends were too boisterous for her taste. They often laughed loudly with each other while exchanging stories and jokes. The young men soon started teasing Ainura, and with increasing frequency they offered jokes intended to make her feel uncomfortable. It was up to Ulan to protect her, and thus the pattern was established. Ulan would laugh and giggle with along his friends, and when they crossed the line of expected politeness, which men are supposed to show near young and particularly unmarried women, Ulan would immediately step in to protect Ainura's modesty and dignity.

The young woman was aware that this attention and care directed toward her was actually Ulan's design for courting her for affection. He even went further by bringing Ainura flowers. "Expensive flowers," the blushing woman added. I teased Ainura: "You must have been putting special meat in the dough for that *manti* you were feeding him." The young woman laughed. Most humor is universal - consistently the same in all corners of the world.

In the bazaar cafe where turnover was relentless, the young woman learned how to cook well. She made perfect dough for *lagman* and her bread was delicious, too. She knew all trouble-shooting tips if something went awry with her dough, and she knew how to make an excellent soup from three-day-old, previously cooked lamb bones.

Ainura and Ulan started to date. Every day the young man came to the eatery, and finally one afternoon accompanied her back to her family home where Ulan politely introduced himself to her parents. From this point on the couple felt free to continue their daily ritual of meeting, as well as spending time in her house together. Every day - from 5 to 6 p.m. - Kyrgyz television aired a Mexican soap opera called *The Land of Love*, and each day at the same time, while old Soviet black-and-white television screens were bringing melodramatic Mexican love stories to her parents and their community, Ainura and Ulan carried

out their own Kyrgyz love story. It was obvious that Ainura and Ulan were ready to marry.

Ulan's family was poorer than Ainura's, and could not pay *kalym* (dowry) to Ainura's family. To get around this, there is an established practice of bride kidnapping, which has become a common way for Kyrgyz to get married as no one loses face and tradition is upheld. Although Ainura did not expect any other conclusion to her own romance, she was still petrified when it did in fact happen to her.

On this day it was very hot and dry as the young woman sat on the stoop of her home peeling potatoes for dinner. Ainura wondered why potatoes looked good from the outside but, as she peeled, seemed to reveal as either green or rotten inside. For some reason, she could not sleep the previous night because of a barking dog, or maybe it was something else. Ainura's long black hair was messy, and she wore slippers. She was in the kitchen putting the potatoes in a pot of water when a woman from the neighborhood appeared at Ainura's backdoor. The acquaintance invited the young woman to her house as she explained that her husband was out and she wanted to show Ainura something. She consented and left her potatoes sitting in a tepid pot of water.

It was not until Ainura found herself in her neighbor's house, that she doubted the real nature of this invitation. Just then, a group of men burst into the house. "These men wanted to meet you," the neighbor said to Ainura. She recognized no one from this group, and she could not conceal her panic. The men laughed at her and said, "We are going to bring you to the 'Pot University'." This is the coded phrase used to indicate a bride kidnapping, and now the young woman understood her situation; she was about to be kidnapped.

The problem was that she could not know where and to whom they intended to bring her. Even if a girl dates one person, sometimes she can still be kidnapped and brought to someone else and his family, by which time her marital fate is for the most part sealed. Ainura did not know these men and she rightly feared that she might be kidnapped and forced to marry a suitor other than Ulan, perhaps even someone she had never seen or noticed before.

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