The grain crop that year was unusually large. Fall had dragged out and the birds, seemingly unable to make up their minds about leaving their nesting grounds, kept flying over the boundless fields in arrowlike formations from morning to night as if on the lookout for something, perhaps hoping to meet those returning from the war.

The fact that the war was finally over had brought joy to people's faces, a double joy. After a disquieting five years service on the border and a short but fierce encounter with the enemy, men were returning home to their gers, to engage in peaceful labor.

The highway to the western aimags, passing through the center of the state farm, split the mouth of the broad and fertile valley in two. The rumble of tractors and harvester combines, and trucks scurrying back and forth moving out the bumper crop, continued day and night. The entire valley was filled with the drone of engines. A solid blanket of dust hung over the road, and truck headlights swung along it in the night like wandering stars from a fairy tale.

Other trucks, packed with young men in green sun-faded army shirts, were stopping near the mess hall at the state farm center. The young men, jumping from the trucks onto the road, would stretch their cramped arms and legs, look around happily, and broad smiles would light up their faces, tanned and coarsened by the hot winds. Overcome by marches across the sands of great deserts, thirsting for home, water, eye-gladdening landscapes and native skies, they strove toward people as if they saw in them a brother, a father or
a mother. Old men and women would shower them with impatient questions, "You don't happen to know our boy? You haven't met him? When will they let him come home?" It never crossed their minds that hundreds of other strangers had already asked these soldiers similarly naive questions many a time during their long and exhausting trek.

But among those who gathered around the trucks were frequently some who avidly and hopefully looked into the faces of the soldiers; ashamed to address them, ask them about what was ceaselessly torturing and burning their souls. Tserma did not approach the men either, but kept looking closely at them as if trying to remember their every little feature, miss nothing, and would then follow the departing trucks with a long and steady gaze.

"Of course," she thought to herself, "not everyone's term of service is the same. It's obviously not easy to get discharged after serving only a few months. And besides, he's a commander, and thus, they say, will stay in the army."

Gansukh was the only male in the family, but still a little one — only six. When his father was called up, he started washing his bowl himself of his own accord so as to help Mother. "So when will Daddy come home?" he frequently asked, and Tserma would always reply that news about him had probably gone astray but that he was sure to return. The main thing was for Gansukh to eat well and grow strong, and his father would show up as unexpectedly as the birds in spring.

An exciting bit of news like a spring whirlwind swept the state farm's camps that evening: "Old Damba's son has returned home!" People from almost all the neighboring camps gathered around old man Damba's ger. His youngest son was one of Tserma's pupils, and she decided to take advantage of this and also call on the boy's older brother and inquire about her husband. Coming up to the ger, she saw old Damba wiping the sweat from his face; he had probably been lighting the fire on the hearth.
"Oh, our son's teacher!" he exclaimed happily. "Do come to the khoimor, honored one. Sit down, please."

Others rose to make way for her.

The soldier was sitting in the khoimor too, with a North Star Order and two medals on his broad chest. One could immediately see he was a worldly-wise veteran who had experienced much in life, and all listened to him with bated breath.

"It's no joking matter, five years of army rations! Five years of service is like crossing a mountain pass it took five years to ascend to. We had our fill of summer heat and winter frost. But what could one do! Those were troublesome times, and it wasn't quiet on the border at all. But now the war is over, and those who have served their full five years and even those who have been in the army only five months are being discharged."

Those last words gave Tserma a warm feeling inside. She had so many questions to ask this experienced soldier but couldn't find the right words. What did she really know about army life! The host, quite aware of Tserma's thoughts, interrupted the young man:

"Hold it, son. You don't happen to know where Sanja is, do you? Perhaps you know when he's supposed to return?"

All the eyes turned towards the teacher. Holding her breath, she looked fixedly at the soldier, and it seemed to her that everybody in the ger could hear how madly her heart was beating. For but a fraction of a second it seemed to her that the young man's voice had faltered, that his recounting was not so smooth as before.

"Yes, war's war," the soldier in the meantime continued. "One sees nothing in the heat of the fighting but smoke and fire. There are no wars without bloodshed. I needn't tell you what a Mongol warrior is like. He forgets about himself completely on the battlefield, only hatred for the enemy and an urge to beat him at all cost predominate. When we crossed the border, I lost sight of all
my friends. Who knows where and in what units they are! I don't know what to say about Sanja, we never met. And sometimes you meet a familiar person in battle, but it seems like you've never seen him before."

A hum of assent rose and all nodded their heads, and the soldier went on with his account: "I remember we were once attacking... our sabers were drawn, and a 'hurrah' was rolling over the field..."

But Tserma was no longer listening. She hastened home. After her meeting with the soldier something kept troubling her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. There had been something strange about the soldier's behavior. She seemed to be hearing a whisper in her ear, "you expect no trouble, but trouble is inevitable, the wind carries it on its wings." These thoughts increased her melancholy. Not knowing what to apply herself to, Tserma opened her valise and got out her husband's letters and papers. Leafing through them always gave her pleasure. Here was evidence of his bravery during the fighting at Khalkhin Gol — the certificate of his Order. How many years had passed since then!

Suddenly something dropped to the floor with a ring. Tserma started and looked up in surprise. Little Gansukh, flushing a deep red, was standing at the sideboard, and at his feet, on the carpet, lay a cut-glass vase.

"You've broken Daddy's favorite vase!" Tserma cried out in bewilderment.

But no, the vase was fortunately still intact. "A good omen," flashed through her mind, and she sighed with relief.

"I wanted to put it lower," Gansukh explained apologetically. "I want to collect a lot of candy and fill it to the top for when Daddy comes home. May I, Mom?"

"Yes, yes, my son, that's a good idea!" Tserma replied, impetuously embracing and kissing the child.
"And when will Daddy come home?"
"Soon, my little one, just a little more patience."

When Tserma came to the kindergarten the next day to pick him up, Gansukh asked, giving her a searching look, "Has Daddy come?"
"The time will come, and he'll return, he'll return for sure, Gansukh."

She led the little boy past young, recently planted trees from which the wind was snatching dry and yellow leaves. Their bare branches, like praying arms, stretched toward the sky, and it seemed to Gansukh they were on the very verge of tears. He was walking, holding his mother's hand and, contrary to his habit, was asking no questions. Every once in a while he would kick some pebble that was lying in their way and continue on, strangely concentrated, moroselike, as if immersed in a very important and serious thought. When they came home, he took two candies from under his shirt and, holding them carefully in his tiny fingers, looked up at his mother: "May I put these candies aside for Daddy, Mom?"

Tserma gave her son a tender look. "What a dear child," crossed her mind, and she replied in a trembling voice, "Do as you think best, son!"

Gansukh came up to his mother, "And where can I put them?"
"Put them into Daddy's vase."

Gansukh opened the sideboard, pulled up a low stool, carefully climbed onto it and, reaching up to the cut-glass vase on the top shelf, put his candies into it, such big and tasty ones.

The next evening Gansukh noticed that some strange change had come over his mother. There was something different about her face, so sad and stiff, her eyes red and her eyelids swollen. The boy immediately realized something was wrong and showed her the new candies he had saved from the kindergarten.

"I'm going to add a candy to the vase every day now," he said, "so that when Daddy comes there'll be a whole lot of them."
The first thing he did after coming home was to place the new candies with those of the previous day and then to stand before the vase, gazing at his wealth a long time. After feasting his eyes on the treasure he again came up to his mother:

"So when will Daddy come home, Mom?" he asked looking up at her through those black eyes of his, so much like his father's.

"Daddy?" she repeated in a strange unfamiliar voice. "He'll... he'll come, son, when the vase... when his vase is full to the top with candies."

Knitting his brows, Gansukh remarked, "How long that will take!"

Tserma convulsively swallowed the lump in her throat: "Now why had she said that to him? Poor boy!" Her only consolation was that the vase was a big one, and it would take him a long time to fill it.

That same evening a tall broad-shouldered man in a military shirt came out of the big white ger from which could be heard the noise of many people. He called over the children that were flocking around the ger and began handing out candies to them. Gansukh got his share, too, and immediately raced home.

"Mom, Mom!" he started shouting from afar, "Zorig's dad has come back; now why hasn't ours?"

He opened the sideboard and dropped two more candies into the vase.

"I'll fill the vase, and Daddy'll come back. I won't eat any of the candies they give us in kindergarten..."

Unable to listen any longer to her son's prattle, Tserma rushed out of the ger.

Now the vase with its candies was torturing Tserma, too. At first she had hoped that Gansukh would forget about the whole thing, but in vain. Every morning as he woke up and rubbed his eyes, he would go to the sideboard and look attentively into the vase.
Returning home one day after having taken Gansukh to kindergarten, Tserma went to the sideboard for something and flung up her arms in surprise: the vase was almost full. She got a sick feeling; what would she say when he came shouting "Mom, Mom! Look, it's full!" and started shouting happily and embracing her and jumping and running madly about the ger? What would she tell the boy who was waiting for his father so much?

Suddenly she hit upon an idea. Wiping the dust from the vase, she took one of the candies and hid it. Gansukh didn't notice anything. Coming home from kindergarten he immediately put another candy into the vase. Tserma hid that one too.

Several days passed when Gansukh finally began to notice that something was wrong. The vase had stopped getting full. His amazement and indignation knew no bounds, and he finally arrived at the conclusion that mice were to blame for it all. He had heard that when a child fell ill, mice would bring water in tiny pitchers, invisible to the human eye, to slake the patient's thirst. Well, if they could lug water, they surely were strong enough to make off with his candies. And Gansukh decided to cover the vase with a big wooden bowl. Now the mice wouldn't be able to fool him!

One day Zorig came to kindergarten with a real military badge on his shirt. Gansukh was almost struck dumb with envy.

"Did your father give it to you for good?"

"For good? Are you kidding? A fat chance I have getting it for good. But why don't you ever wear your father's? His is even nicer. I saw it myself when my father gave it to your mother. Didn't she show you?

"He's lying," Gansukh thought to himself.

"You know what your mother said? She said she'd hide the badge and you would wear it when you grew up and went to school."

"Did she really say that?" Gansukh was beginning to believe him.

"Honest to God! I saw it with my own eyes, it's in a
beautiful little red box.

"And did he say when my father would come back?"

"No, but I heard them speak about something else. I made believe I was sleeping and heard everything. He said they had gone on a scouting mission together. And when I opened my eyes to take a look, I saw your mother was crying..."

The last words Zorig pronounced in a whisper, but Gansukh heard them very well. His heart almost stopped beating, and his hair seemed to stand on end. "If Mom cried, that means Daddy won't return home, won't ever return home!" he thought to himself. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he clenched his fists not to cry. "But Mom keeps saying Daddy will come home," his reflection continued. "She probably knows something but doesn't want to tell me." And without waiting for his mother to pick him up left the kindergarten in the evening for home.

Seeing his mother through a crack in the door, sitting at the table checking her pupils' notebooks, Gansukh lost heart. How could he ask her about this terrible thing he had learned, so terrible it was unbelievable?

Taking himself in hand, he crossed the threshold with a smile, flung his cap on the bed, and with a casual move produced two candies from under his shirt but then stopped in indecision. Should he put them in the vase or not? He stole a furtive glance at his mother.

Tserma became suddenly aware of her son's glance and started. She closed the notebook she was checking and rose.

"Why aren't you undressing, son?"

She went out to get some firewood. Calming down, Gansukh looked into his vase and again discovered that candies were missing. There was no question about it, somebody had again been at his hoard!

"What's new in kindergarten today?" Tserma asked, returning
with the firewood.

Though she was smiling, Gansukh managed to detect signs of
tears. So Zorig must have told the truth. But he didn't start to
cry. He was now after all the only man in the ger! No, he mustn't
cry, otherwise his mother will start crying too. Of course, it
would be easier to bear all this if he had that badge Zorig had
told him about. If it's true that Zorig's father brought his
father's badge to his mother, then where could she have hidden it?

Gansukh's mind was completely taken up with the badge and he
kept looking around all the time trying to guess where it might be.
He couldn't ask his mother, for she would have told him herself had
she wanted to.

In the evening Gansukh did not go out to play with his friends
as usual. But as soon as his mother went off to school on some
business, he got a little key out of a hiding place and opened the
big valise. Rummaging through everything, he finally came upon a
little red box at the very bottom of the valise. Holding his
breath, he took it out, placed it on the table, wiped his suddenly
sweating palms on his pants, and with a cough -- involuntarily
copying his father -- opened the box. It was all true! There it
was, a big nice badge the likes of which no one had ever seen.
Depicted on the glittering enamel was a horseman with a rifle be­
hind his back and a sabre at his side, looking through field
glasses. And at that moment Gansukh made a terrific discovery; the
horseman on the badge was the spitting image of his father!

Carefully wiping the enamel of the badge with the sleeve of
his deel, he twirled off the knob from the bolt on the back side
of the badge. By means of this bolt the badge could be attached
to his shirt. This thought simply took his breath away and the
badge slipped from his hand to the floor. He picked it up with
trembling fingers and, calming down, remembered about the open
valise. Taking a look at it, he even got scared. It turned out
that, looking for the cherished little box, he had turned everything
upside down. What if Mom walked in right then?! The next moment
he was back at the valise, pressing on the cover with all his might,
but all his efforts were in vain. The valise would not shut.

Tserma came home and decided to have some tea. As soon as she
opened the sideboard she saw that Gansukh had that day added no
candies to those in the vase. She stood rooted to the spot. What
could that mean? He hadn't gone out of the house today and hadn't
played with his friends. When she returned he was already asleep
in bed. Could it be that he had caught on? She went up to her son,
straightened the blanket and, after standing for a while at the bed-
side, moved toward the table with a sigh. "My poor little boy!
Your father will never again return to us," she said to herself,
and suddenly turned about; it seemed to her he wasn't asleep. "And
still how strange that he didn't put any candies in the vase today."
She listened for a while to her son's regular breathing and again
grew thoughtful. "War cares not whom it kills, but what about those
who remain? The poor boy is already an orphan. God, how he will
cry when he learns the truth!" and the sharp pain that pierced her
heart tore a groan from her.

She recalled Zorig's father's account to the very last detail.
They had both been together on a scouting mission near Dolonnor and
were already returning to their unit. All around was enemy terri-
tory, alien and vicious. Suddenly they ran across an enemy force.
Sanja ordered him to retreat with the information they had got and
himself remained to cover the retreat. He was one against many and
the bullets were coming at him like hail. How could he survive,
how could he hide from the bullets if the enemy ground all around
was so flat! Tserma kept repeating those words to herself again
and again, swaying from side to side and looking at her sleeping
son through half-closed pain-shot eyes. "One against many...a
hail of bullets, those accursed bullets...if that had only not
happened!"
Zorig's father had given her something she would now keep as her most cherished treasure, the badge "For Excellent Frontier Service."

She wanted to have another look at it and opened the valise. The badge wasn't at the bottom where she had put it but lay prominently on the very top of all the neatly folded articles of clothing.

Meanwhile, Gansukh just couldn't get accustomed to the idea that his Daddy would never again come home, that he had become like his grandmother who left them for good last summer. The thought that his father was like granny was so absurd and strange he could find no peace of mind. He was now more frequently looking at the vase with quite different eyes.

One day when Tserma returned late, Gansukh wasn't home. She went up to the sideboard to remove one or two candies from the vase as she had lately been doing when something stopped her. "Enough, this must stop! Gansukh will eventually learn the truth anyway. Better that I tell him. A change has definitely come over him lately. He must have learned something from Zorig and that's why he rummaged around in the valise," she thought to herself, standing at the sideboard.

Suddenly Gansukh rushed in noisily, and Tserma, like a guilty child, shut the sideboard hastily. Without taking off his coat, he pulled up a stool, climbed up on it and taking two big candies from under his shirt made as if to put them in the vase, and suddenly discovered the latter was full to the top.

"Mom!" he shouted with all his might, "Mom! It's full, look! Will Daddy come today?"

Tserma stood in bewilderment. She couldn't and didn't want to lie. But something broke down in her, and instead of an honest "No, son, our father will not return" she forced a "Yes, son, he'll come..." from her constricted throat.

Her voice sounded so unusual, there was such soul-freezing despair in it that Gansukh immediately realized his father had
really become like granny. Some invisible force unbalanced him, the stool swayed from under him and, falling, he brushed against the vase. The latter smashed to the floor, fragments of glass and candies in multicolored wrappers flying in all directions.

Gansukh broke into tears, but not because he had hurt himself. No, men don't cry because of pain. He was so terribly sorry about the cut-glass vase. Yes, certainly. He was crying only because such a beautiful vase — let Mom think that! — such a beautiful vase had broken. Tserma pressed her son to her breast, and tears she had never dared show in his presence fell unrestrained from her eyes mixing with her son's.

An orphan's bitter tears...How many of them have thou absorbed, our ancient and cherished Mongolian soil!