The elderly headman of the nomad camp told Dolgor she could stay at home although it was her turn to tend the flock.

Her hands busy with the colored rope that fastened the gates of the sheep enclosure, Dolgor heard the words and rejoiced.

"Stay with him. Don't worry. Let him have a day of rest."

"Yes. He's sleeping now," Dolgor said. Then she remembered that Dendev was leaving that evening, and her spirits fell.

"Go home now," said the headman. He untied the knot and opened the gates wide. As if waiting for this, the flock of sheep streamed out like water through a narrow channel.

Dolgor stood for a moment looking at the bleating sheep, then slowly made her way over to her felt ger covered with faded cotton print.

She was depressed. For the past few days she had been filled with a strange sadness and langour.

"I wonder what's the matter. I'm acting like a silly young girl," she thought. She had wanted to cry when the headman told her she could have the day off. "I wonder what fate has in store for me."

All around her the earth was coming back to life. The snow that had been lying all winter in a thick layer was beginning to melt. Brooks babbled gaily as they wound their way like snakes through the gullies and hollows.

Although banks of snow still glittered in the sunshine the sides of the hills showed a touch of green.
The breath of spring was everywhere. Behind the camp a kid had climbed onto a rock and stood swaying on its spindly legs. Through the waves of steaming spring air the silhouette of the horses grazing on the hillock wavered and quivered as if they were a mirage.

Dolgor did not hurry to enter the ger. She walked around to the back to make sure the animals had not pulled down Dendev's shirts which she had washed and hung out on a line. How quickly they dried in the warm rays of the spring sun! Dolgor picked up some sticks of firewood, glanced back at the flock grazing on the darkened eastern slope of the hill, and entered the ger.

Dendev was still asleep. It was hot from the fire in the stove. The blanket had slipped off, showing his strong chest.

"I'll let him sleep," she thought. "He hasn't had a decent night's rest since he came, working the way he does." She added a few sticks to the fire and listened with satisfaction to the crackling of the wood. Then she poured herself a cup of tea, picked up a tobacco pouch from the bed and smoothed it lovingly.

Dendev smoked a Russian pipe with a bowl the size of a fist and a plastic stem. When he and Dolgor had been gathering brushwood yesterday and Dendev had sat down to smoke, he discovered the pouch had a hole in it through which tobacco had spilled into the pocket of his padded green jacket. Dolgor had been very happy when he asked her to make him a new pouch. She got down to work that very evening. She wanted to decorate it with some special kind of embroidery. He sat on the bed puffing on his pipe and laughing at the energy she put into her sewing. She did not know whether Dendev understood how she felt about it.

As she embroidered some Mongolian designs on the pouch Dolgor recalled her youth. Twenty years ago, when she was still very young and shy, she had fallen in love with a boy from her village. She had also lovingly embroidered a tobacco pouch for him. One
evening in the fall when small, fleecy clouds floated in the sky she had said good-bye to her betrothed. Blushing, her eyes filled with tears she tried to hide, she had handed him the pouch with outstretched arms. He was a tall handsome lad, always ready to burst out laughing, but now his face was grave. He pressed her hand and whispered as he put away the gift, "I will always carry this pouch with me, Dolgor, to the day I die."

From that day on Dolgor considered herself his bride. She would often stand gazing to the east, to the hills over which he had gone. The hardest to bear were the times of blizzards. Then she would grow restless and keep running out of the ger to look to the east.

The happy days when he had been beside her were over. She came to know the deep despair of loneliness. After the war broke out there was no news for a long time, and then late in fall came the letter that put an end to her last hope.

Holding in her hand the tiny sheet of paper, no larger than the palm of her hand, that told in a few words of the death of her beloved, she stood silent, unable to weep or to cry out. Many years had passed since then, but she could not recall the moment without anguish.

Dolgor came back to the present when she felt a sharp pain in her finger. She had pricked herself with the needle.

The morning sun glanced into the ger through a haze. In the yard the neighbor's children were shouting at their game.

When Dendev awoke and, stretching himself, sat up, Dolgor laid aside her sewing and put the tea kettle on the stove.

"Boy, did I have a good sleep!" Dendev exclaimed, putting on his boots and going out into the yard in his undershirt. Dolgor was happy to see him relaxed and rested. She did not want him to do anything but rest. She did not want to hear him say he had to do this or that or to think of going out for wood. She quickly
prepared breakfast.
"I must get a supply of wood in for you," said Dendev as he came back into the ger. "What you have won't last long."
"You ought to rest for at least half a day."
"I've been having a holiday for a whole month," he said with a smile. "We don't consider chopping wood work; it's nothing compared with repairing machines."

Dendev drank up his tea and put on his jacket.
"Shall I come with you since you are not going to be long?" Dolgor asked questioningly.
"As you wish."

Happily Dolgor ran over to the neighbors to ask them to feed the lambs. Then, picking up a rope, she set out beside Dendev.

Dendev walked along with long, heavy strides. He carried an ax and a rope.
"What a wonderful day! Look, there's a mirage. And over there, ants crawling out of Danzan's stove. Now they will crawl around, black and shiny as if they had been smeared with grease."
"Do you remember how much snow there was when you came?" Dolgor asked.
"That was exactly one month ago. How the time has flown with all the work."

Dolgor rejoiced. That meant he was sorry the month had gone so fast.

They reached the forest where the snow still lay thick.
"You gather wood and I'll chop," said Dendev, driving his ax into a stump.

The sound of the ax rang through the forest. Leaning against the trunk of a birch tree, Dolgor marveled at the way Dendev split the trunk with one blow.
"Now that winter is over it's time to go. They're waiting impatiently for me," said Dendev.
Dolgor knew he meant his comrades, mechanics as strong and muscular as he, smelling of machine oil. He had come to help the cooperative to repair its machinery. Dolgor had grown attached to him, a man as alone in the world as she. When he arrived at the camp the headman had asked her to put him up not because there was no other place for him. He had talked to Dendev the whole evening, asking about his life, and then had assigned him to Dolgor's ger.

Dolgor had grown so used to living alone that the headman's request dismayed her. To refuse, however, would have been awkward. Since the death of her betrothed Dolgor had avoided people. She had lived alone like that until she was forty years old. "That's the way my life will be to the end," she thought. "Nothing will change. But at least I have kept faith with the dead. I'll tend the flocks of the cooperative."

But Dendev had come and brought back her youth. It was as though he had fanned smoldering coals.

They worked together through difficult days that sometimes merged into sleepless nights, their enemy always the bitter cold. When, worn out with weariness, they returned home to rest, each showing concern for the other.

It seemed to Dolgor that Dendev understood her without words, but he did not say anything about what he felt. Only once did he pause and say, eyes fixed on the ground:

"Sometimes the idea of marriage comes into my head." He turned to look at Dolgor, as if asking a question. Dolgor blushed. "It is not for me to speak of that. You speak!" was what her glance said.

Dolgor hoped that Dendev, to whom she was sure she meant something, would some day tell her so. Then she would be proud and happy to answer "yes." She truly loved this man whom she had met in middle age.

"Shall we go, Dolgor?" Dendev asked, his hand on her arm.
Dolgor started at the unexpected touch and absent-mindedly moved forward.

The sun was going down. The headman had returned after leaving the flock to graze on the eastern slope of the hill.

Dolgor let out Dendev's horse, stroked its neck, and went over to the headman.

Dendev sat in the place of honor, outwardly composed, drinking tea. Before him stood a bowl of boiled meat. The faces of the men were flushed and their eyes shone. They were talking animatedly.

"You've helped us a great deal during this month you spent with us, Dendev. We have grown fond of you. We regard you as one of us," said the headman.

"Thank you. And you have helped me a great deal. Especially Dolgor who did the sewing and washing for me. She always had a hot dinner for me and a tasty breakfast in the morning," Dendev replied as though speaking especially for Dolgor who had just entered. He drew out the pouch she had embroidered and lit his big pipe.

"Have you saddled the horse? It is time to leave."

"I'll see you off," Dolgor's face was pale and she had difficulty breathing. She turned away from the headman who knew exactly what she was feeling. The headman shook Dendev's hand and wished him a happy journey.

"Be sure to write to us. Come to see us in the fall. We will be glad to see you."

Dolgor and Dendev walked side by side, leading the horse.

Slowly the sun sank, painting the sky a beautiful pink. A light breeze carried with it the smell of earth recently released from its cover of snow.

"What am I to say to you, Dendev? From the very day — it's all so strange — " Dolgor decided to speak out but fell silent without finishing her thought. Could it be Dendev did not understand what her heart was saying?
They walked on in silence. Finally Dendev spoke. "We have lived together like brother and sister. I shall not forget you. It does not pay for you to go any farther. Return now. It is time to feed the lambs. Do turn back." The words pierced her heart. Were these the words she had been waiting to hear? It was the end of her hopes and her happiness. The end of her dream.

Bitterness choked her. She felt empty and cold. But Dendev went on speaking. With typical practicality and lack of sensitivity he told Dolgor where she should go in the forest for wood to make it easier to bring it home and advised her to lay in a supply of pressed manure with which to keep the lambs warm in winter.

His words came to Dolgor from far away. It all seemed out of this world.

If he has no pity for me there is nothing to be done about it, Dolgor thought. Aloud she said, "Is that all you wanted to tell me?" "What else is there to say?" "Farewell," whispered Dolgor, her teeth clenched. "Good-bye," he said, pressing her hand, and leaped into the saddle. He looked back. "Maybe I'll be back in summer, Dolgor, when I get my holiday. Then we'll discuss it."

Dolgor did not reply. Tears filled her eyes. She wanted to run after Dendev and fling herself against his broad chest.

Seeing the tears in Dolgor's eyes, Dendev choked. He looked toward the west where the sun had almost set, took a deep breath and shouted, "I'll be back!" He put the spurs to his horse.

Her hands pressed to her chest, Dolgor watched him ride away until he disappeared over the hill. The last pale ray of the setting sun warmed her heart, and she smiled happily.