THE KERCHIEF OF LOVE
by
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Tsetseg stepped out of the ger. She had been living in the Steppe Spring Agricultural Association for two months, ever since two new gers were pitched there. From afar they looked like two white shells that were somehow brought into the steppe.

Tsetseg shielded her eyes with her hand and looked across the steppe. The empty valley stretched to the horizon, there was only one dark spot in the middle of the valley, a tractor, and small figures moving around it. The wind grew stronger carrying light, reddish dust over the newly-ploughed field. Tsetseg went back to her ger and sat down on the loose end of the felt covering the frame of the ger. She raised her head and looked into the distance, but then her shoulders drooped again. Finally she got up quickly and went inside.

Her ger was spacious and sparsely furnished—only an iron bed, a table and a bench, a pile of suitcases, and a trunk with a transistor radio on it. There was also a pile of spare parts for the tractor and other agricultural machines. Tsetseg looked around, and when her eyes fell on the transistor radio she thought irritably, "Such a silly box! The batteries are no good; why couldn't Namjil go to the center and get new ones. He promised to do it two weeks ago but still has been too busy to find time for it." While the radio worked, she felt better, she could listen to some music or news from Ulaanbaatar, and there was always something to discuss in the evening.

Tsetseg loafed around the ger for some time and then went out again. She pulled her kerchief off her head and walked to the
Namjil was driving the tractor while Oyungerel operated the seeder. When Namjil saw Tsetseg, he switched off the motor.

"Why have you come? Do you want to sow? But your back will hurt again and you'll have another sleepless night."

Tsetseg did not answer him and watched Oyungerel. Then the eyes of the two women met and it seemed to Tsetseg that there was challenge in Oyungerel's eyes.

"You have come here to do research, haven't you? Instead you've become a tractor driver," Tsetseg said in a high-pitched voice.

"Do you think to do research means only to write something?" Namjil said laughing.

"All right, go ahead and work. I won't be in your way," she said and walked back.

In the afternoon the weather changed. It grew cold, and the wind raised clouds of dust over the fields and carried them to the slopes of the surrounding hills overgrown with trees. Soon the reddish veil obscured the hills from view. Tsetseg thought that the day was lost anyway and the ploughers would come home any minute. But they were not coming, only the dulled roar of the motor was to be heard in the dusty mist.

They came late in the evening.

"Look, your ears are full of dust," Tsetseg said to Namjil who was washing himself. "What's the use to work out in the fields in such bad weather?"

"We must keep up with the schedule, each minute counts during sowing time."

"And what about me? Shall I spend all day alone like a bird that has fallen behind its flock?"

At night Tsetseg couldn't sleep. She was lying in the darkness listening to the howling wind and thinking what she could do in this godforsaken steppe.
Several days later Tsetseg heard the roar of a motor. She ran outside and saw a truck from Ulaanbaatar that delivered some cargo to the local association and was then sent to bring fuel to Steppe Spring on its way back. The young truck driver turned out to be a jovial fellow. Tsetseg chatted with him about the pleasures of life in the city and the difficult conditions in the countryside. Surprising herself, she suddenly asked him to take her to the city. They started on their way when she saw Namjil.

"Good-bye," she thought and waved her scarlet kerchief. The wind caught it and threw it against Namjil's chest. The truck roared and speeded along. Namjil kept standing there, pressing the scarlet kerchief with his hand.

It was fun to ride with the young driver. He was cracking jokes and saying pleasant things. Tsetseg's heart was at ease. She looked around the cab, and found an illustrated magazine behind the sun-visor. She started leafing through it absentmindedly and found a picture of a new district in Ulaanbaatar. Their building had been exactly like those in the photo. Last fall Tsetseg thought that she would be happy at last. First, Namjil graduated from the institute, got a job in the city, and a fine job at the ministry at that. Second, they got an apartment. It was a stroke of good luck to get it so soon. Tsetseg, happy and contented, could often be seen standing on the porch of her apartment. But happiness is so fragile; a single remark ruined it.

"You know what? We are moving, say good-bye to the city," Namjil said to her one day.

Tsetseg started to back away from him when she heard the news.

"Don't be frightened. I have volunteered to go to the countryside. It will not be easy at first, but why should we shrink away from difficulties? I cannot and don't want to stay away from my real work. It's like roaming far from your beloved girl."

Tsetseg was completely at a loss, it was so unexpected that she did not even protest or scold Namjil. The only thing she
realized was that his decision was final, and she only asked him: "And what about the apartment?"

Now she was going to the city, and she would stay there for good.

Parting with the young driver in Ulaanbaatar Tsetseg invited him to visit her.
"I really don't know, will it be proper?" he said.

But in a week he came to see her.
Tsetseg opened the door, her eyes red from weeping.
"Will you go back to the steppe?" she asked him sobbing.
"What for?" The young man was surprised.
"I want to go back."

During that whole week she spent in Ulaanbaatar she kept sighing, recalling her departure and her stay in Steppe Spring.
"It was not bad there, after all," she thought. "The valley is so wide and soon it will be green. Wheat will grow in Namjil's field. How is he getting along there without me?"

She felt better only when she met her girl friends, but as soon as she was alone she felt sad. She even developed the habit of talking to herself. Once she caught herself saying out loud:
"And what about my kerchief? Has he kept it?"

Meanwhile Namjil spent every day working in the field. When Tsetseg returned, he took her to the field and tore off an ear of wheat.
"One, two, three...ten...fourteen...twenty-nine...thirty-one. Here you are! There are thirty-one grains in this ear. That's wonderful, and this is only the beginning. I'll grow high quality wheat." Namjil crushed the wheat ear in his hand and blew. The chaff flew away and the yellow grains remained on his palm.

Tsetseg was looking thoughtfully at the golden waves rolling across the wheat field.
"I would like to learn to operate a harvester combine," she
said.

"What for?"

"To reap wheat."

"But, darling, your back will hurt again and you won't sleep."

"It doesn't ache any longer, you'll see."

They returned home to the association center on a motorcycle. The scarlet kerchief was tied around Namjil's neck. Its ends were flapping in the wind caressing Tsetseg's face, as she clung to her husband's back.