A NEW DEEL FOR SEVJIDMA

by

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If you, dear readers, have any friends who are well acquainted with the job of a newspaperman, they can probably tell you about the disappointment a luckless correspondent experiences when he fails to make a famous but too modest person "open up" and talk about himself. The notebook is almost empty, the editor's assignment has not been fulfilled, and it's high time to return. I once experienced just that after spending half a day on what seemed to me a flop interview with a well-known woman cattle-breeder at a conference of the country's foremost cattle-breeders.

An acquaintance of mine, a top Party functionary, praised the woman to me and asked me to write a story about her. I tried hard to find out about her life and work but learned almost nothing, apart from the words, "I work. I look after the cattle the way I was taught to." And somehow I didn't see anything striking about her in general. The only strange thing was her much too loose brown silk, sheepskin-lined deel with its terribly long sleeves. Very disappointed and on the point of leaving, I suddenly remembered I had a camera with me and decided to at least take her picture, especially since my acquaintance had also asked me to do that.

"My deel is too big and I probably won't look well in it," she said, touching up her braids and wrapping the robe closer around herself in embarrassment.

"Oh, that's perfectly all right," I said, putting her mind to rest, and then asked slightly in jest, "Why do girls from your region wear such loose deels? Is it the fashion there?"
"Oh no, fashion has nothing to do with it," she replied with a burst of laughter and then told me why she was wearing a deel that was several sizes too big for her.

Her story was a real coup for me, and I'm sharing it, dear readers, with you.

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A passenger car was heading along the old örtöö road from Khatanbulag to the aimag center. A young round-faced girl was sitting alongside the driver, trying hard to look imposing—she was, after all, coming in from the capital.

The car climbed a hill, and there suddenly opened before their eyes the boundless Gobi steppe, here and there spotted with wormwood and saksaul. A flock of sheep could be seen in the distance; there was a well there most likely in the winding gully. Horses and camels were grazing closer by.

"That's probably the well I'm looking for," the girl said. "Let's drive up closer and ask."

"Righto," the driver said. "I'll give my old car a drink while we're at it."

Sheep were crowding around a trough at the well, and a hobbled horse was snorting and stamping nearby. A woman came up to meet the car. Picking up an urga from the ground, she stopped to look at the strangers. She was wearing a green sateen deel, flung over her shoulders, its sleeves tucked in behind a belt, crude boots and a multicolored kerchief. The short sleeves of her white blouse revealed strong tanned arms, obviously accustomed to physical work.

Greeting the visitors, the woman began watering the sheep. Her movements were deft and attractive.

"How do you manage to water so many sheep yourself?" the girl from the city asked.

"I just have no choice," the woman answered calmly.
"You must be tired. Let me help you," the driver proposed.
"Yes, a bit. But keep in mind, it's a deep well, and raising water from it is not easy!" the woman replied, handing him the pail and wiping the sweat from her brow with the palm of her hand.

Noon in the Gobi toward the end of August is a veritable inferno. The sun beats down mercilessly, and the sand feels like red-hot coals. The breeze, heavy with the pungent smell of steppe onions, not only carries no coolness but, on the contrary, constantly sweeps everything with its hot breath as if to burn it all up. "And in this broiling heat a woman manages to water so many sheep all by herself. The Gobi cattle-breeder's job is indeed not easy!" the girl from the city reflected, looking with sympathy at the woman. They finally struck up a conversation. It turned out that though this Gobi woman's family was not large, it was keeping her much too busy.

"Mother is old and ailing. So she stays at home, and I look after the cattle."

"Is there no one else in your family?" the driver asked.
"Why yes, I have a husband and a daughter."
"Then why are you working alone?"
"My daughter's at school and my husband's good for nothing. He's riding around all the time attending meetings and conferences and has no time for home."

The woman finished watering the sheep, took up the urga and, mounting the horse, tightened the reins.

"Aren't you afraid of breaking the urga?" the driver asked with a smile.

"Of course I am. Without an urga in this broiling heat I'd have to ride a camel. Before I part with my urga..."

"...You'd rather part with your man, eh!" the driver prompted.

"Right! It's sometimes very difficult to find yourself a good birch urga," she said, embarrassment suddenly stealing into her voice.
"A husband may come in handy too," the girl came to her assistance.

"So you can't get much profit out of husbands nowadays, you say," the driver pressed on, and all three started laughing.

"Do you really catch horses yourself?" the girl asked in surprise.

"Yes, and I happen to need a fresh one today." The woman raised her urga and touched the horse off.

"Wait there!" the girl suddenly shouted, remembering she had forgotten to ask the main thing. "Where is famous cattle-breeder Senge's ail?"

"Senge, did you say?" the woman asked, halting her mount. "Over there, beyond the hillock," and pointing her whip to the northeast, she galloped off to the herd.

The car started for the ail. But the driver and his youthful passenger both kept an eye on the woman who was about to catch herself another horse. She tore right into the midst of the closely bunched herd, and a chestnut stallion shot out at the same moment. Leaving a cloud of dust in his wake, he galloped off. But the mounted woman went right after him, not letting him gain an inch. From afar it looked as if she was joined to the stallion's tail. When her hand holding the urga levelled with the stallion's rump, she shot the noose forward, and the next moment the urga, noose and woman's arm, as if by magic, turned into a single taut line, and the stallion was noosed. Resisting, he tried to get loose, but the woman kept drawing him closer. Then, quickly dismounting, she slipped a bridle on him, her actions so swift and neat a man might have envied her.

"She seems to love her urga more than her husband," the girl remarked almost to herself.

The car finally drove up to the famous cattleman's ger. Khuruud and steppe onions were drying on boards. Inside the ger were big painted trunks, a sewing machine and many other things.
Food was kept behind a clean little curtain, cups and crockery were covered with a piece of cheesecloth — everything bore an industrious woman's touch.

They asked the old woman in the ger where the master was.
"Who knows!" she replied. "He's always attending meetings and making speeches. He's so busy, he's never home." She began treating her guests to strong tea, barley scones, sour cream and butter.

The girl, in the meantime, began questioning the old woman about her family. She learned that the household depended on her daughter-in-law, and though it was not an easy job, their ail had that year overfulfilled its livestock increment quota and could therefore send one of their people to the national cattle-breeder's conference.

"Where is your daughter-in-law now?"
"Where would you expect her to be? With the cattle, probably. Watering our sheep at the western well."
"Is she wearing a green sateen deel?" the driver asked.
"Yes, did you meet her?"
"We did. She's sure clever with an urgal I saw that with my own eyes."

"There you are, my friends. With a husband like that you have to learn everything ... My husband was also a bit of a loafer when I was young. He didn't like to work. And I used to hobble the horses and do all the chores ... in a word, do everything. In those days husbands made merry and feasted mostly while their wives did all the work ... There's no denying, many were the hardships we lived through. And now I'm completely broken down, can't get up, can't sit down, can hardly move," the old woman complained.

"But your son is a hard-working man, a cattle-breeder well-known throughout the suman."

"He's well-known all right, but a lot of good that does us! Now most of the time he's strutting about with the chairman at all kinds of meetings ... great talkers, little doers ... My daughter-
in-law hardly manages to get everything done. He'd have done better helping her than wasting his time at meetings."

After their talk with the old woman, the guests rose to leave. There wasn't much hope of the master showing up. The girl wrote something in her notebook and put a big question mark underneath it.

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It had been a mild winter, with little snow, about a hoof deep. Three gers stood in a well-appointed winter camp within a rock enclosure. Sleek well-nourished sheep and camels lay about quietly, warming themselves in the winter sun's weak rays. It had obviously not been a bad wintering.

A tall rider of about thirty on a sinewy bay stallion neared the ail at a trot. A long black moustache adorned his full dark-skinned face. A Foremost Cattle-Breeder Badge and a Labor Merit Medal glittered on his chest. Riding up to the ger at the southwestern end of the ail, he dismounted, stuck the reins underneath the rope that encircled the ger, threw back the felt entrance flap, pressed it down with a rock and entered. This was famous Senge himself. Catching sight of his mother who was sitting at the hearth, unpicking his old silk deel, he said:

"Ah, that's good! Making me a deel! Just what I need."

"No, my son, I'm not making a deel, I'm unpicking an old one. It's worn out and torn in back. I'll try to let it out at the shoulders, maybe you'll still be able to wear it," the mother replied.

Senge sat down and lighted a pipe.

"I asked you for a new deel long ago, but you kept putting it off. And now I might as well take off naked for the cattle-breeder's conference. I can't really appear before the minister in a worn-out deel!"

The old woman was silent for a while.

"What conference now? Will a minister even attend it?"
"Didn't I tell you I was being sent to a conference of the country's top cattle breeders? Since summer I have been asking you to prepare everything for my departure. I have to leave the day after tomorrow and still haven't got a decent deel."

"Don't worry, the deel will be ready in time," and the old woman rolled up the unpicked deel.

"And where's Sevjidma?"

"She's out. She rose at sunrise and said she had to go and look for two stray camels."

"She's never at home! Of all the days she had to pick today. She doesn't like sitting at home," Senge reflected in irritation.

When Sevjidma finally arrived, he began urging her to hurry, arguing that he couldn't go to the conference in an old deel.

"All right, I'll start sewing your new deel now," she said, but you'll have to look after the cattle today."

"All right. I'll tend to the cattle. But you be careful not to spoil it in your haste, do your best. They wear attractive deels in Ulaanbaatar."

All day and all night she sat sewing the deel and finished the last buttonhole by morning. Senge tried it on, and it was perfect.

"Well, my son, the deel sure turned out neat. You should make a real hit in it," the old woman remarked.

"No objections, Mom! A lamb for one flap, a colt for the other. May the fabric wear out but the master never," Senge responded with a well-known flourish.

"Mother wished us seven children for the new deel I made her, but we have only one little girl so far," Sevjidma said laughing.

"Foolish woman," the old woman chided her. "You don't know yourself yet how many children you'll have. You may have more than seven."

"Maybe you'll wish him a medal on his new deel?" Sevjidma continued.

"Of course, why not?" Senge himself retorted as if that were
the most natural thing.

The sound of hoofbeats reached them from outside, a dog barked. The suman official had arrived.

"Hello, what's new?" Senge asked, adjusting the belt of his new deel.

"Nothing new, I was just told to pass on to those who will attend the cattle breeders' conference that they'll be leaving tomorrow with the mail car. They should be at the suman center at twelve sharp."

"Is that all? I knew that long ago and had made my women hurry up with the new deel. I was just trying it on."

The official burst out laughing.

"So you were sure you'd be elected, eh? You're a fast one, even had a new deel made. But you're not going this time. It's your wife who's going."

Senge stood dumbfounded.

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not kidding," and he produced an invitation card from inside his deel.

The card indeed bore Sevjidma's name.

"How come I wasn't elected?" Senge murmured in surprise.

"You used to be elected before, but the people now decided differently," the official replied.

"Absolutely right!" the old woman joined in. "Who tended and fed the cattle all winter and summer? Who sweated in the heat and froze in the cold? Sevjidma, of course!"

"Now, don't stick your nose into something you don't understand," Senge fumed. "How naive you are! Imposing and clever people are sent to such important state conferences. Speeches have to be made there, and from a rostrum at that. But she'll just sit there like a scarecrow!"

"So what! There's a limit to everything; you're all the time
away at conferences. At least I'll get a look at our beautiful Ulaanbaatar," Sevjidma said amiably.

"The deserving should go," the official concluded and, reminding Sevjidma not to be late the next day, bid them all farewell and left.

"But what will you travel in, my dear daughter-in-law? I've already sewed up his unpicked deel," the old woman said, nodding in her son's direction.

"It's all so ridiculous. What are we going to do? She'll have to put on my deel," Senge offered.

"But, Mother, what am i going to say at the conference? I'll really be sitting there like a scarecrow," the young woman said in a worried voice.

"You'll find something to say, my girl. You know your business. You're a real cattle breeder. But how will my son and I manage here in your absence? We'll probably disgrace ourselves. I'm after all an old woman."

This once Senge held his peace.

That was how Sevjidma found herself at the conference in her husband's deel.

After hearing this account, I decided to write a poem. Nothing, however, came of it but the following clumsy lines:

Though I've donned my husband's deel
Which is way too big for me,
There are medals on my chest
Glittering for all to see!

Well, the poem hasn't exactly worked out, I said to myself, and decided to write this story.