I saw my daughter running along the slope of the hill jumping from one large rock to another.

"Daddy!" she cried excitedly as she reached me and seized me by the sleeve, "I have found such an interesting rock! It is all covered with moss and half-hidden in the ground. On its face there are some strange inscriptions. Probably they are in Turkic. Come and see!" and she pointed in the direction of the hill that rose solemnly before us.

I hesitated; should I follow her or move on? Our car was parked alongside the road and the driver was busy beside it. He was pouring water from the Shuvutin into the radiator. The Shuvutin, a clear and narrow stream, kept rolling its waters over the pebbles close to the road.

The driver dropped the hood in its place and sat down on the grass to rest.

"It's a nice spot," he said, stroking the soft green grass with his black hands covered with oil as if it were the hair of a child. I turned to him and asked:

"Have we still far to go?"

"We are almost there. This is the enclosure where they keep the sheep. You are probably very tired."

He turned on his side, leaned on his arm and lay staring at the cloudless sky with wide-open eyes.

"It is so nice here in the sun!"

"Daddy!" my daughter cried impatiently again. She had taken the camera from the car and was opening it.
"These will turn out to be great pictures. I will show them to our teacher when I get back to school."

She ran away parting the thick grass with her hands. I watched her black head move far ahead and then saw her bend down over a large stone plate. Jumping over ditches I followed her.

A large yellow stone resembling the moon turned out to be a millstone. Time, rain and wind had left their mark upon it; the lines of the old pattern that covered it had cracked, and the cracks reminded me of ancient letters. If the stone could speak, it would have greeted me and told me an interesting story.

There had been only one mill in our village, and I remembered its millstone perfectly well. My heart started beating loudly as I recollected the wonderful days of my youth. I do not know why but my eyelids trembled and an unexpected sadness filled my heart.

How many pure, hot tears, helpless from a sense of injury had been shed upon this stone? I stroked its rough surface with the hard, calloused palms of my hands and noticed a tiny drop of water in one of the cracks. Could it be rain? Or maybe this was one of the tears I dropped at a time of sorrow? But there had been two stones, as alike as twins. I looked around me; the stone foundation that used to do the heaviest work had to be somewhere close by. But it was not there. Maybe the stone had been buried in the ground so that no greedy foreigner should notice it? Or maybe someone had taken it away with him to a faraway land? I lowered my head and turned away. My daughter who had been silent all this time asked in surprise:

"Can't you read the inscription, Daddy? Well, then at least take a picture of it," she asked. What could I tell her and would she understand me? Probably I looked perplexed and I muttered:

"You see, this is not a monument but just a common millstone."

"What? A millstone?" She looked me straight in the eyes. The child had probably guessed that something was going on in my heart, but I was not sure.
"Where is that large stone?" I kept wondering. I could not imagine who could have wanted it and for what purpose. And indeed a millstone could be quite easily mistaken by my daughter for a historical monument. My entire life was also something very remote and ancient for such a young person as my daughter, and hence I had never told her anything about my life or about what I had been through.

There were many things I could not tell her about. My daughter was like a gentle flower that has just burst into bloom, like a carefree butterfly. She did not know that once I had whispered gritting my teeth: "Let death take her if need be." Could there be other fathers on earth with such sinful thoughts? Could there?

Hardly anyone can answer this question. Neither the bright summer sun nor the bubbling stream nor the gloomy Delgerundur rocks. When misfortune had visited my house I begged them to help me, but they all looked at me distrustfully and kept silent as if lost in deep thought. I alone can answer this question. I shared my feeling of resentment only with this millstone, the eyewitness of those remote days. Poor thing; it had done its service, the same as I.

* * *

A lifeless white moon as if frozen to the heart stood in the dark blue sky upon a winter night. The mountains and valleys covered with snow had long lost their warmth and looked like glass in the unstable moonlight. Even the occasional barking of the dogs who had stayed to spend the winter in the valleys and gorges of the dark mountains instilled fear. It seemed that the whole world, the rivers and mountains were holding their breath and listening to the noise coming from afar. The silence of the night was broken only by the clatter of the hoofs of a horse moving a stone press.

It was beginning to dawn.

I came out of the house. The sharp wind cooled me and I stretched several times to chase away the traces of sleep. Then I stood outside for a long time looking at the objects surrounding
me. All around me there was the vast white steppe. Small mud huts half-buried in the snow stood close to me. In summer people used them for storing the ropes with which they fastened their gers, grain, and domestic utensils. In winter one could hardly ever see a cart track by them.

There was one single family living in this desolate place. It consisted of Dolgor, an old woman who watched over the huts and was the owner of a poor ger, and her daughter, seventeen-year-old Janja. There was also a young boy exhausted by hard work.

Grabbing a shovel I started hammering at the frozen lumps of horse manure that seemed as hard as stone. Then I unharnessed the bay horse and it slowly walked away along the narrow path. The door slammed. Janja came up to me, keeping to the wall of the mill, and looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time:

"Haven't you ground the flour yet?" she asked.

"I am just finishing. Why have you got up so early this morning?"

"Why, I got up as usual. And you... How are you? Were you very cold at night? Come in, have a cup of hot tea. May I winnow?"

"Oh, no! What will the old folks say! I will finish soon and then we will go together."

While I worked I did not stop admiring Janja, her large black eyes and comely face. I did not want her to go away.

"You have stopped visiting us lately," she said and her voice had an offended note.

"You know that I have not got a place of my own."

"We are poor, but we'll be always glad to have you."

"But if Dondog saw me, I'd feel embarrassed. Men like me had better go their own way."

"Nonsense! I have nothing to do with him," and she dropped her eyes.

"How can you prove it?"

"How would you wish me to?"
"Then I'll kiss you," I said jokingly.

Janja looked at me from beneath her eyebrows and smiled shyly. "People will see."

She was silent for a moment, then took a handful of flour and said:

"What fine flour! Is it true that you take it to Dash? Poor man, he has so many children! Let them have good food for a few days at least," she said with pity.

I poured out the remaining chaff into the winnowing machine, distributed flour carefully and went in side-by-side with Janja.

It was very hot inside the ger from the fire and I felt dazed. I drank some hot tea and got drowsy. The old woman got up from her bed and cried to her daughter:

"Janja! Give Shagdar something to eat. There must be some scones left from yesterday."

I broke off a piece of scone and put it into my tea.

"I know you are short of flour. I'll bring you some tomorrow," I told the old woman.

Dolgor looked cheerful.

"Thank you, sonny," she said. "Dorj promised to lend us a measure of wheat."

"I have some grain, Granny, people pay me with it instead of money."

Janja cut into our conversation and said resolutely:

"Why are you in such a hurry, Shagdar? Let your horse rest awhile and you too. We'll mill the flour together the day after tomorrow, all right?"

The weather became warmer that evening, and soft white snow like flour let through a sieve started falling upon the ground. Together with Janja we finished all our chores and entered the ger when it was already dark. A small lamp stood on an old black trunk covered with dust. Old Dolgor was on her knees and saying a prayer.
Then she rose to her feet and said:
"Soon there will be peace and then we shall rest, children. This is a very hard war," she added with a sigh.

I could not go to sleep for a long time that night. In the moonlight coming through the half-closed window I could clearly see Janja's dark face. I looked at her with admiration for a long time and remembered how that evening when I was feeding the horse she had come up to me all of a sudden and kissed me. Her lips had been cold and soft; she did not know how to kiss and had been rather awkward. Probably this was the first time she had kissed a boy in her life.

"Tomorrow I'll spread out the wheat on the ice of the river and clear away all the dust..."

I did not finish my sentence when I heard a horse neighing on the other bank of the river. We raised our heads almost simultaneously and listed with bated breath. Old Dolgor was probably on the alert too. What could be the meaning of that? We were afraid of everything during those wartime years.

"Who could it be on such a dark night?"

"Maybe someone has been looking for a herd of horses and lost his way," whispered Janja rising on her elbow and listening.

"Someone is coming here," she said.

And indeed, the clatter of hoofs came nearer and nearer. We could now hear the horse snorting and the frozen bit tinkling.

"This must be Dondog, your boy friend. Who else would ride here at night?"

"Are you afraid of him?" asked Janja.

"I'm not, but what about you?"

"Here you are again saying silly things," she said angrily.

"He has no business here."

"Keep the dog away!" cried someone in a rough voice.

Janja got up, lit up the lamp and let the night visitor in.
That winter we settled beside the old mill, at the very foot of the mountain. Old Sambu pitched his two gers nearby. Life in the valley became more cheerful.

One day the director of the elementary school called on us. "There is nothing left to feed the children with," he said. "The food supply has run out. Shagdar, there is no one else to ask. If you refuse to give us a few sacks of flour, things will be bad with us. We'll pay you in full for the work."

I felt sorry for the hungry children. "Don't worry about paying. We'll settle accounts later. If I had another horse, it would be a great help. Mine is not able to manage the job alone. I'll get to work tomorrow."

All day long I turned the millstones and, absorbed in my work, I didn't notice the winter evening creeping up on me. Our neighbor, an old woman, came running to me. "Janja is in labor. Hurry!" she cried and hobbled off.

I unharnessed the horse and when I went into the ger to get the saddle, I heard Janja utter a loud, piercing cry.

Scattering the snow, I whirled away at full speed to the suman center.

What can I do? They are waiting for me... And if I do not find the doctor? I whipped the poor horse on mercilessly, and my heart was filled with anxiety. What's happening to Janja?

Only after I had climbed the pass, not far from the suman center, did I notice that I had forgotten to put on my deelei, and I quickly put it on.

At the suman hospital I didn't find a single soul. The watchman told me that the doctor had gone to the camp of the volunteers the previous day. The horse under me breathed heavily, wheezing as it drew in the air, and white lather fell from its mouth in lumps.

What was I to do? Return home? Look for the doctor? But the
detachment of volunteers is situated in the Ortsog valley, about two örtöö away. No, I must go to Ortsog!

And again furious galloping. Halfway or a little earlier — I no longer knew where I was or what was the matter with me — the horse under me stumbled, fell and did not rise again. I mounted the reserve horse and continued further. I reached the camp at noon the next day.

On the way home the doctor and I whipped our mounts into a gallop. Dusk was falling when the gers came into view. The animal was winded after the long run, its coat was glossy with sweat. But I was not concerned about it. Pulling the door open, I stepped into the ger.

As before, moans were heard from that part of the ger where Janja lay. I went to get a lamp, but the doctor stopped me on the threshold:

"Shagdar," he said, "your wife's condition is very serious. Don't lose heart," he whispered.

I groped my way into the dark shed and muttered to myself:

"What do I need a child for? If only Janja would live." At this moment, only the old millstone heard my words. Unexpectedly, an infant's piercing shriek resounded. "She has given birth, my darling."

Not knowing what was yet in store for me, I sighed with relief. The voice of the newborn child was still ringing in my ears. It seemed to me that this loud, demanding scream was coming from underground or falling from the sky.

The doctor was swaddling the infant, there was a deep frown on his face, he kept looking at Janja with anxiety. Right then her lips began to move, she was making an effort to say something. Gripping the edge of the sheepskin coat thrown over her, she raised herself a little, but suddenly fell back and her eyes closed. Old Sambu and his wife were crying. After a long silence, the doctor
said quietly: "We were too late."

Those days I walked about as if in a fog. I had on my hands a human being just brought into the world to whom I was father, mother, and granny. Janja's dying look instilled faith in me that I'll be able to bring her up.

To begin with, I learned to milk the cows. This turned out to be very hard, but I had to feed the baby. My hands would be numb with cold, my shoulders become insensible, and I wondered how Janja managed, silently, without a complaint, to cope with the household chores.

Perhaps the most difficult time was at night when I had to grind flour. Sifting it hurriedly, I listened all the time to hear if my little one was crying and, sparing a minute, I would rush headlong to old Sambu's ger. When I heard her crying, I did not wake up the old couple, feeling sorry for them, but entered quietly, kindled a fire in the stove and warmed some milk for my little daughter. Satiated, she would quickly fall asleep again, and I ran back to the mill. I would return home at dawn, put some more firewood into the iron stove and when the ger had grown warm, I brought the baby from the old couple's ger.

Then I set to cleaning and drying pieces of sheepskin which served as diapers for her. Once, as I was feeding my little daughter, my neighbor dropped in.

"Your daughter is already a month old," she said. "It's time to give her a name."

Grief had unsettled me, and I had completely forgotten about that.

"What shall we name her?" I asked.

"Well, since she hasn't had a name until now, we'll call her Nergui." [Nergui means without name.] I agreed.

Life continued to grind along like the millstones of the old mill. Not getting enough food or sleep, I was bringing up my
little one as best I could. What I got from the mill wasn't enough to live on, and I decided to leave it. But how was I to go on living? I wanted to find work not far away from home. Of course, I could have found such work, but I had never learned another trade. After all, what's an invalid fit for?

Still, in a few days' time I found a new job, tanning hides. Now my bachelor dwelling was turned into a real workshop. I had a wooden scraper for currying, white clay in a tub and a knife with a crooked, sharply pointed blade. In the right half of the ger a mountain of skins had grown up — sheepskin, astrakhan, even wolf, fox and hare skins. With my one healthy hand I dressed the tightly twisted skins.

It was work suitable for me in my position.

The cold wind quickly blew out all the warmth out of the baby's cradle since it was covered with only one layer of felted cloth. Then I would light a big fire in the stove.

My work went on quite well. I separated the flesh from the hide, sprinkled white clay over it and crumpled the skin until it became soft and pliable. Sometimes I had to put in some hard work, especially when the skins happened to be damp. Kneading them for hours, my hand would become callous, so that I would have to hold it over the fire to remove the roughness.

When I heard the ringing voice of my little daughter, I put everything aside, stood up, and stretched myself in order to straighten my tired body. Day and night blue smoke curled upward through the toono.

I led a lonely life as before, devoting myself entirely to one task, the upbringing of my only child. I kept the home as best I could.

One morning a small miracle happened which brightened up my life. The ger was very hot, and that must have been the reason why
my little daughter could not fall asleep. So I spread out a piece of sheepskin before the bed and seated her on it. Let her stretch her little legs, I thought to myself, she lies on her back all the time.

After a while I happened to turn around, and what did I see? The little one had crawled up to me, clutching the fur with her little hands. I uttered a joyful cry, gave her a smacking kiss on her cheek and ran out to my neighbors, the old couple. I wanted them to share my joy.

The next day my daughter fell ill, her cheeks inflamed by high temperature. I didn't sleep the whole night, sitting at her bedside.

That day I knew that my little daughter had to have boots, dresses, different toys. Her first dress was made by my neighbor. Is it fair that a strange old woman should do the sewing for us? What if I should learn to make her clothes?

Life went on along its well-acquainted path; one day was just like the next. My daughter grew, stretching upwards like a flower toward the sun. At times I would get lost in thought and sigh loudly as I would turn a new skin in my hand. "It's not a man's work. I don't even have the time to clean up the dirt. I think I'd better return to the old mill."

When my little one turned two she learned to speak her first words. My neighbors would pat her head tenderly and ask, "Who is your father?" She pointed at me. "And who is your mother?" She again pointed at me. The old people laughed. I looked at her, listening to her prattle, and a lump rose in my throat.

* * *

The war ended. The Soviet Union routed Germany, and we Japan. We won a victory. Peace, peace, peace! I heard this wonderful news when I was about to go to the pasture for my horse. Of course I didn't go there, but with the halter in my hand I ran as fast as
I could to my neighbor's ger.

"Janja, you and I were not fated to live together in peacetime. Now you would have been taking our little one to the old mill, you would have been showing her the trees and the grass, teaching her her first words..."

With whom if not with my little daughter could I share this joyful news? I took her on my knees and said three times — on my behalf, on her mother's behalf, and on her grandmother's behalf, "The war has ended. Peace has come." Looking me in the face with surprise, she loudly repeated my words.

Life became easier with each passing day; sugar appeared and tea as well as other goods. One day, finding myself in the suman center, I went to the shop and bought several meters of bright colored material.

Seeing me cutting out a child's dress, my neighbor, the old woman, shook her head: "Whoever heard of making a dress for a little child out of such expensive material?" But I was determined to make a beautiful dress for my little daughter out of the sparkling silk.

Ever since I had married Janja I had never been able to buy material for a dress. Let this dress, made clumsily by a man's hand, be a present from her mother who could not make one during her lifetime. My daughter! You are my sunlight, you are my spring, my darling!

* * *

Our small car was speeding along the level road past endless fields of wheat. The wind carried the clouds of dust to one side.

Our driver was obviously in good spirits and talkative. "The chairman of the suman called me out last night and told me to get ready for a trip this morning. I was on time. Your vacation had ended and you were in a hurry to get home, so I was told. As luck would have it, the motor did not start and while I was puttering
with the car, I lost time; besides, I got stuck on the way. We are sure to be home by nightfall.

"Daddy, look, how funny they are running," my daughter suddenly laughed, pointing at the running quails along the road.

"They come flying from the mountains when the wheat ripens," I said.

"Did you have lots of fun during your vacation, Nergui?" the driver asked her jokingly.

"Yes, I learned to milk sheep and goats, I also can ride a horse," she boasted.

"When I drove you the first time you found an old rock. What was written on it?"

"My father says it was a millstone. It turns out that there used to be horse-drawn mills."

The ripe tight ears of wheat swayed along the road. There was a smell of sour, fragrant corn and I became reminiscent. When we lived in the aimag center, I went to meet my daughter after school. On the way we dropped in at the flour mill. Here at the large gates many trucks were always lined up. One after another they were driven into the yard, and a sparkling stream poured into the open trucks filling them in an instant.

The trucks drove away, but the heady, thick smell of ripe grain remained in the air for a long time. The tall white building of the mill sparkled in the sun. It was pleasant to look at, it was all so new and clean.

I recalled with sadness the mill shed, grown dark and full of chinks which could stand no comparison with this modern structure. What huge grinding machines must be at work there if the flour ground by them is carried away by a whole fleet of trucks!

Every time I have gone along this road, some kind of power, unknown to me, has invariably drawn me to this place.

The driver's voice, talking incessantly, unexpectedly roused
me from my reverie:

"We seem to have enough gasoline and the road is good, no bumps. But to make sure I'll borrow a few gallons from the first driver we meet."

He stepped on the gas and drove out onto the highway. A car coming from the opposite direction had got stuck in the mud. The driver was digging up some dirt and throwing it under the wheels. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he turned around.

"I'll be damned!" the words broke from my lips.

That was Dondog.

"Damn, it's been raining like hell! The whole world is flooded like the devil. Yesterday the rear wheel of the car skidded into a ditch. Well, I thought to myself, I am done for! I spent the night in the steppe and, what do you know, not a single car passed!" he grumbled.

Our driver, having examined the rear wheel, suggested: "It would be good to place a couple of large rocks here." We went in different directions in search of rocks. I found a large flat boulder and, straining myself, tried to pick it up with my one hand.

Our driver came running up to me: "Drop it, sir," he said. "We'll manage without you."

Dondog glanced at me with surprise and again bent over with the air of a busy man. He must have felt awkward about meeting me because he looked at my crushed arm from time to time. I noticed that Dondog's face had grown pale.

Perhaps remembering his evil youth, he was repenting a thing or two. I didn't want to touch on old memories, and what could Dondog answer me, anyway?

At last we managed to pull the car out of the ditch. I don't know when the drivers warmed up to each other; I only saw Dondog climb into the car, drag out a small barrel, knock out the peg and
yell:

"Bring me some container. Take the gasoline, as much as you need. I have plenty of this junk."

We wished one another a happy journey and departed.