One day during lunch break, my friend and I were sitting in the shade of a large fragrant haystack and talking. Drawing on his cigarette my friend who was obviously in a fine mood, was smiling widely, while the soft breeze blowing from the mountains caressed his wide chest bronzed by the sun. Dry blades of grass got stuck to his dark sweaty face, his narrow brown eyes shone with happy excitement.

Then he turned to me feeling for something in his pocket. Finally he produced a pretty envelope which he held in his hand for a while and then asked me quite unexpectedly:

"I've got a letter from Mother. If you know Russian, please read it to me."

Before that he had told me that he was a mower, in fact one of the best in the association, and that he was from the same region as I. Why then does his mother write him in Russian, I wondered. I studied his face closely, but there was nothing Russian in it. And I thought that this man probably had an interesting life.

"You were brought up by a Russian mother, weren't you?"

"No," he said.

"Where are your parents, where do they work?"

"My father and my mother are cattle breeders. Both of them come from around here."

I was at a loss and kept pestering him with questions.

"But where is your Russian mother now?" His eyes sparkled with joy when he heard my question, as if he was just waiting for it.
"My mother lives in Leningrad. I love her no less than my own mother."

My friend lay down on the ground next to me, propped his head on his elbow, and started telling his story.

* * *

When it all happened I was driving cows from a distant pasture. I grew tired and was terribly thirsty. It was growing dark and the outlines of all the surrounding objects merged into a single dark spot when I finally saw our white ger in the distance.

We had a fine ger, not some shack lined up with the wind. My father built a new cow shed of good sturdy boards next to it.

My mother was standing in the door of the shed. She looked alarmed.

"What took you so long, you are barely able to lift your feet," she said.

At that moment an acute pain made me double up and moan.

"What is the matter with you? Are you ill?" she asked, terribly worried.

My father was not home. He had gone to attend a meeting in the morning and hadn't come back yet. Soon the whole neighborhood knew about my disease. Late in the evening our lama (my mother's elder brother) came, with a white face and a beaklike nose. My mother rushed to meet him and, swallowing tears, started telling him about me.

"When he left for the pasture he was perfectly all right and now, look at him! He is so terribly pale. It may be somebody's evil eye. Tell me, will he get well or not?"

She wiped her tears with her sleeve and started fussing, laying the table with sweets which she long saved for New Year's and a bottle of vodka.

The lama drank almost half of the vodka and pointing his
finger at the censer he said: "Put some coals in there, sister."

Mother hurried to the backyard and brought back with her a couple of lumps of dried herbs and lit the hearth. While the fire was burning the lama took a small iron box with dice, shook them several times and then put them back again.

"Everything is going to be all right," he started murmuring. "Your son will get well."

The bluish fragrant smoke from the burning herbs started spreading in the tent. The lama, with his eyes popped out, started singing a prayer. He sang quicker and then he swung the censer over my head several times. When he got up he quickly covered the bottle with the remaining vodka with his sleeve and said, looking disapprovingly at the ceiling:

"It's too bad you called me so late."

My mother put her hand under the pillow, took out her bag containing five tögrög and gave the money to the lama.

Far from getting better I felt even worse than before. Soon the pain in my stomach became unbearable.

Mother came up to me quietly and froze at my bedside. I was all covered with cold sweat and kept groaning loudly since I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Lama gave you a good medicine," Mother kept consoling me tenderly. "Tomorrow morning you'll be healthy again, my son."

By the time my father returned home I could no longer lie in bed. I sank to the floor and stood on all fours crying with pain. Father, his eyelashes still covered with hoarfrost, didn't even drink his tea. He looked at Mother and asked:

"What shall we do?"

"Let's go. Perhaps we will survive. It is better than sitting here and waiting for God's mercy." Mother dried her tears and Father silently took out his pipe but, without smoking, threw
it away and walked out of the ger. In a moment he was back with several mattresses and warm sheepskin deelei.

"I'll go and harness our brown ox. He seems to be faster than the others." My mother left my bedside.

"We'll take you to a doctor in Nalaikh. We'll get there by this time tomorrow," she said.

Father was walking in front of the cart while Mother kept circling around it fixing my warm deelei. The road was bad and the bumps shook the cart terribly, causing me such horrible suffering that I almost lost consciousness.

My poor parents seemed to share my pain and suffered even more than I. With trembling voices they kept imploring me, "Hang on a little longer, son."

The next morning we entered a long ravine filled with big snowdrifts. Sharp pain suddenly pierced my stomach, and it seemed that a hot wave ran over my head and feet and then swept over me so that I couldn't breathe. I threw off my deelei and heard my mother shout: "Stop!!"

Then I lost consciousness.

When I opened my eyes I saw the wide face of a blue-eyed woman, dressed in a white smock, leaning over me.

The sunbeam that penetrated through the frosty window gilded the woman's fair hair. I realized that it was morning.

I looked at the woman without trying to hide my surprise. Her tired face brightened up and her cheeks flushed a bit.

She sighed with relief and patted my forehead with her tender hand.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked.

Then she invited my mother and father to come in. They both cried with joy when they saw me sitting in my bed and drinking hot
"What a kind woman! She saved my son's life," my mother exclaimed. The doctor only smiled.

"Now you may go and take a rest," she said. "The crisis is over. We have nothing to fear any longer."

My mother started to the door but then she suddenly stopped, turned to me and said the words which came straight from her heart:

"Listen carefully, my son. Your father and mother already cried over you, thinking that you were doomed, but the Russian doctor saved you. From now on you should call her eej [Mom]."

The doctor overheard her, and said in good Mongolian: "That's how it is, my son."

The Russian doctor called a nurse and explained to her what medicine to give me. Then she came to my bed and tucked me in. She left the ward, and I burst into tears deeply touched by her loving care and attention.

* * *

My friend got up and looked at the ger from where the loud voices and laughter of the mowers were heard. Then he took a photograph out of the envelope showing a gray-haired Russian woman with deep wrinkles on her forehead, and showed it to me.

"This is my Russian mother," he said. "Her name is Vera Povloyna. I had a brother, too, he was a tall boy with freckles on his nose. His name was Volodya. My brother was killed in the war."

We sat for a long time without saying a word.

"You are her son, indeed," I said. My friend nodded and said:

"Yes, I'm her only son. After we finish mowing I want to go to see her."