

On the way to school the next day I talked to Mimi about it. "They were idiots. They thought they could run away but Chingis didn't even bring his coat. Hunting with eagles? They were scared of a fox. I saved their lives. They'd've died of hunger without me."

"What were they running away for, anyway?"

I didn't want to tell her about the demon because it was so stupid, so I just said, "I don't know."

"Maybe their mum is a bit of a witch. She never comes to get them, does she?"

"No. But honestly, they were on the beach and they didn't even know it was the beach. If the tide had come in, they would have drowned. I saved their lives."

"I don't know why you bothered. I don't know why you hang around with them, anyway."

"Well, I won't now, anyway."

Which I didn't.

* * *

Because in the first lesson Mrs Spendlove came in and stood in front of the class without saying anything for ages. She did this so long that in the end, everyone went quiet.

"I've got some very sad news," she said into the unexpected quietness. "I got a phone call this morning, in the very early hours of the morning. It was from Chingis."

Everyone sat up. *Who phones a teacher?!*

"It's a complicated situation and I don't know all the details but basically, because of things to do with the law, Chingis's family were not supposed to be in this country. They didn't have the right papers, and though they'd been trying to get them, they ran out of time. I'm afraid the police came very early this morning to take them away and send them back to their own country. That's why Chingis rang me. He wanted to say goodbye to you all."

And that was that. We never saw him again.

I thought about things, talked about things. Mostly with Shocky, funnily enough. He was the only one who seemed to grasp how bad this was.

I think Chingis knew that something was going to

happen. Of course he did. Their bags were packed and in the hall. His mother was terrified when there was an unexpected knock on the door. He knew it was going to happen. They were going to come.

I think he had some idea that if he ran away with Nergui then maybe when the police – or whoever – came, they wouldn't make their parents leave because the kids were missing. I think he thought that if he could hide out for a while, maybe it would be OK.

But I found him. The Good Guide. I took him home. And that's where they got him. I'd led him straight back to them.

The day Mrs Spendlove made the announcement, I waited in the cloakroom after school, wondering what to do. I watched all the coats go one by one, until only one was left.

"Miss!" I shouted as she came out of the classroom.

"Look, Chingis's coat. It's still here." How could his coat be here and not him? "They'll have to let him come back for his coat, Miss, won't they, Miss?"

"I'm not sure, Julie. No, I don't think so."

"But temperatures reach as low as minus fifty on the steppe in winter. There's frost on the humps of the camels, Miss. How can they send someone there without a coat?"

"Maybe someone will give him another one."

"It's a special coat, though, Miss – for extreme conditions. It's a traditional Mongolian coat."

"I'll take it. How about that? When we find out where they are, I'll post it to him."

"That'd be best, Miss. Can you do that?"

"I'll do it first thing."

But she left the coat hanging there when she went. And it was still there the next morning. And here it is now, all these years later, in the lost property box. It was never returned.

I can see now that it wasn't anything like a traditional Mongolian coat. It's some kind of big, ancient hippy coat. An Afghan coat. There's a label inside that says BIBA – LONDON. They probably got it from a charity shop or the box of donations at the refugee centre.

And in the pocket are the photographs. Photographs of a Mongolia cobbled together from bits of Bootle. Chingis's Mongolia was one big mental ovoo.

"Did you ever hear from him again, Miss?"

"Call me Claire, now that you're a grown-up, Julie."

"Yes, Miss."

"No. I don't know how bad things were for them.

It really was true that they'd walked out of Mongolia

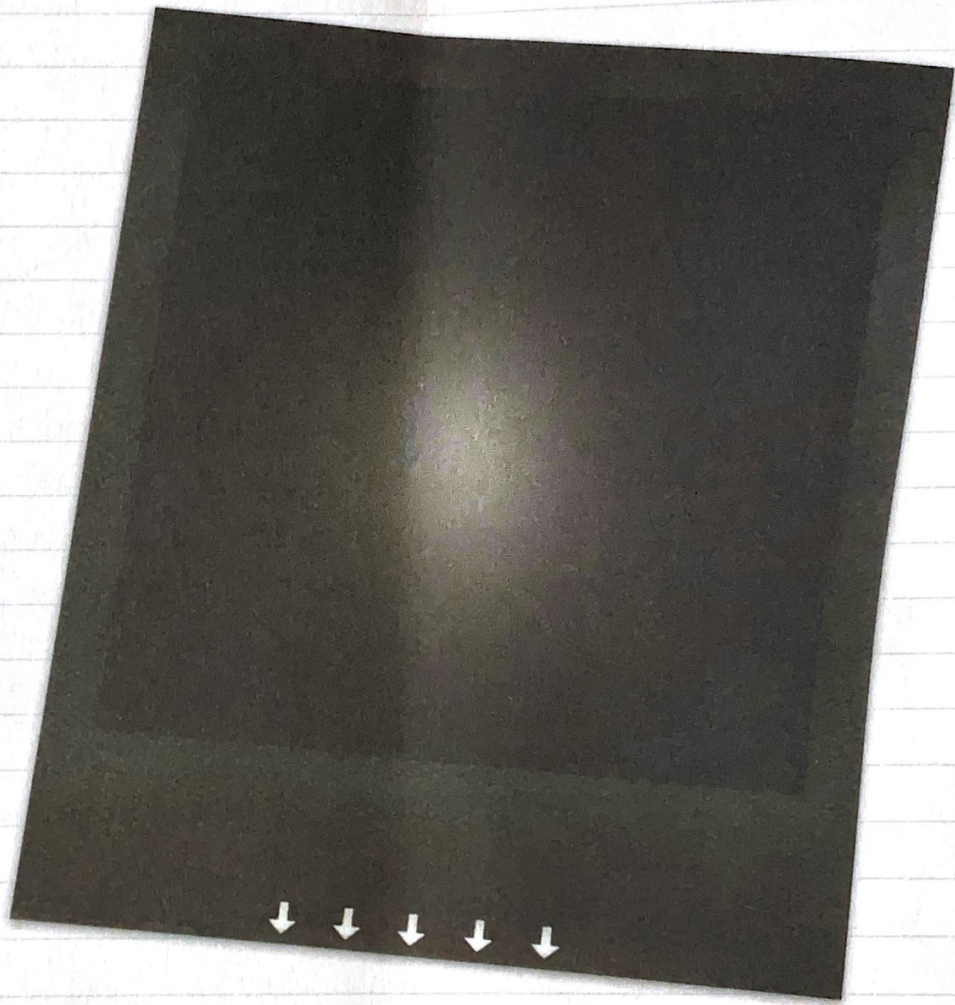
following the railway line. I don't suppose they did that because they were having fun."

"You don't happen to have any pictures of him, do you? All these photos, he took them himself so he's not in any of them."

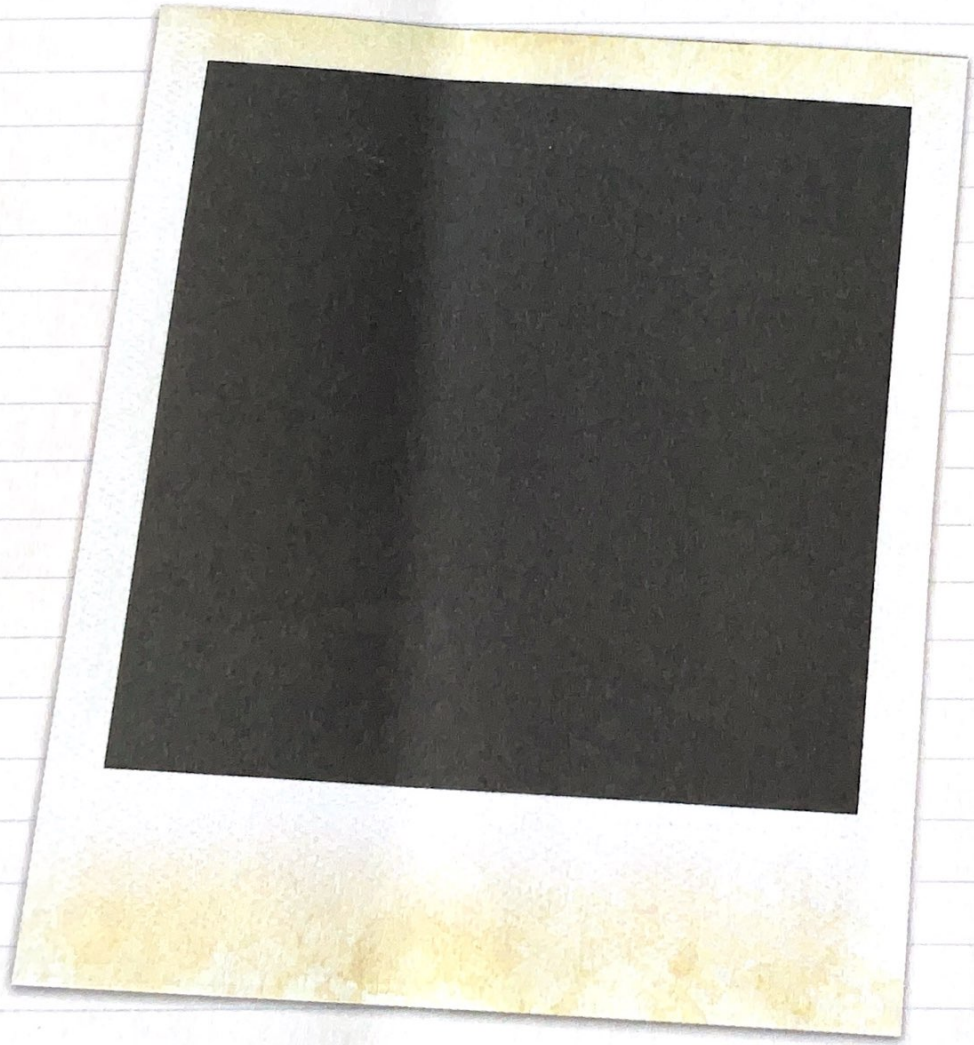
"No. I'm sorry."

That night, I pick up my little one from the childminder, take her home, feed her, and while she is playing with her Playmobil, I root out the Polaroids he'd given me that day on the beach and put them in Chingis's notebook with the others. In bed later, I flick through the notebook with her and make up a bit of a story to go with the photos, pretending it's a picture book. I examine every photo in case he appears in one of them. But no. How could he? He took them all himself.

Then, wedged in the middle, I find one Polaroid that's completely black...



The black is the cover you pull off a Polaroid when it's developed. So this one has never been exposed. Maybe he took a picture of himself. I dig into the black with my fingernails and the cover starts to come up. I can peel it off. So I do...



Polaroids don't work like that, though. If you leave them too long, the light turns back into darkness.

Polaroids are like people.

It's only when I close the notebook and see his name written in full on the front page that I realize I could just google him.

* * *

It turns out that Tuul is the third most common surname in Mongolia and every single boy is called Chingis. That's if his name really was Chingis. There were pages and pages of Chingis Tuuls. I'd also forgotten that I didn't read Mongolian. So there were pages and pages of strange-looking letters with his name highlighted every now and then. Maybe he's the president now or the winner of *Mongolia's Got Talent* or something.

Of course, Julie O'Connor's not an unusual name, either. If he was googling me from Mongolia, what would he find? Pages and pages about a girl who runs a kayak school in California. A woman who makes coats to order in Cleveland. An aromatherapist in Newcastle. Even "Julie O'Connor + Liverpool" gives you a dieting blog, a barrister, two grief counsellors and street dance lessons. Even if you just search Facebook there are more than two dozen of us, with only our profile pictures to identify us. And I'm sure none of us look like we did when we were eleven.

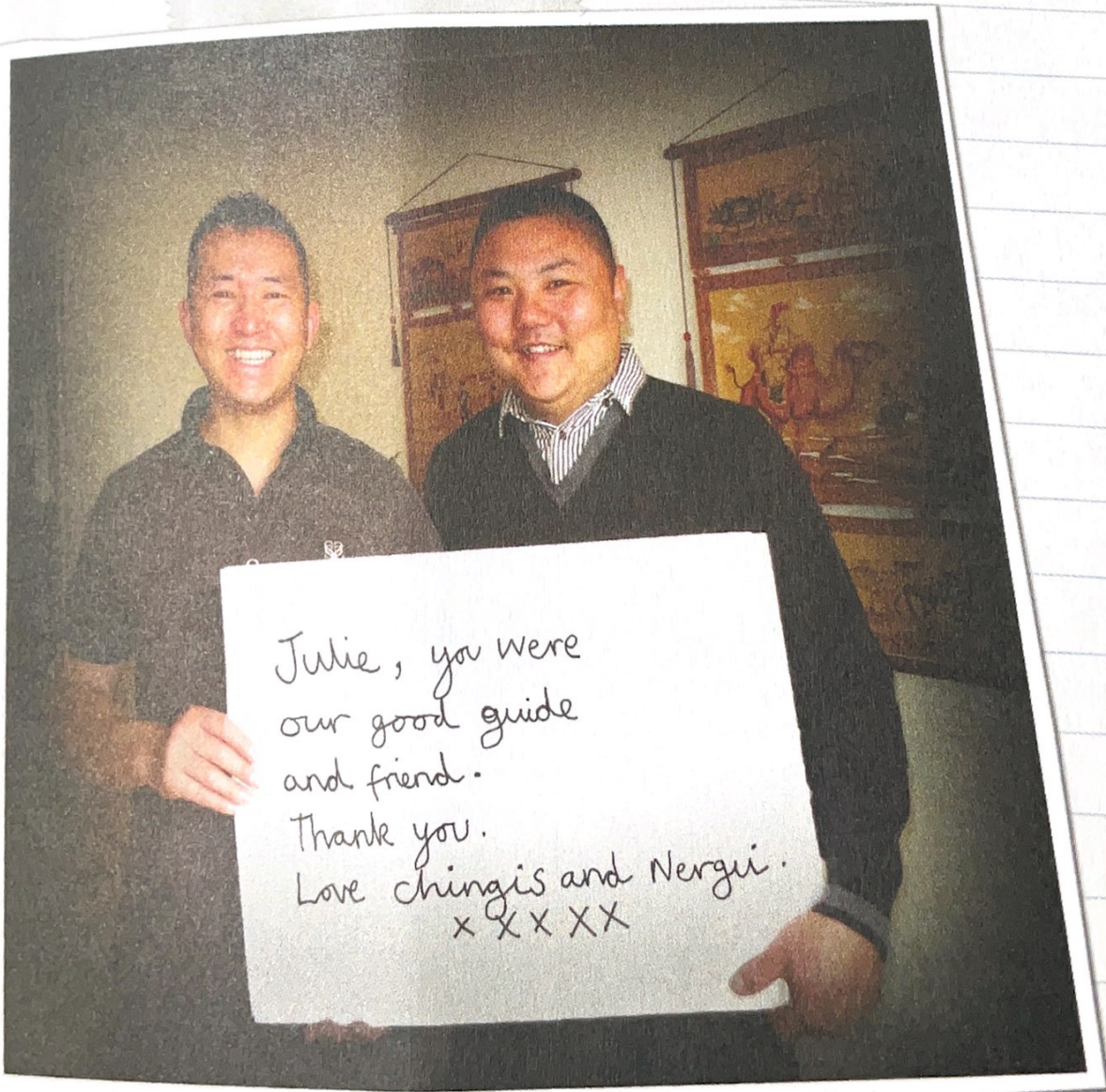
And anyway, why would he be looking for me? He probably still thinks it was my fault he got deported.

I scan the Polaroids and add them to my Facebook page. I even change my profile picture to that photo of the coat hanging in the cloakroom.

* * *

Two days later, he tries to add me as a friend. Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe he's been checking all the Julie O'Connors in the world every day for years. I don't know. But he's tried to add me. So I accept the add, say thanks and ask if he wants the coat back.

He puts "yes please" and messages me his address. And he tags me in this photograph...



Julie, you were
our good guide
and friend.
Thank you.
Love Chingis and Nergui.
x x x x x