

The yurts were all empty and there was no sign of life, except that the tents themselves seemed to be breathing as the wind moved in and out of them.

"Why is there no one here?" said Nergui.

"Is it all right to go in one?" said Chingis.

I had no idea whether it was all right or not, though I told him of course it was.

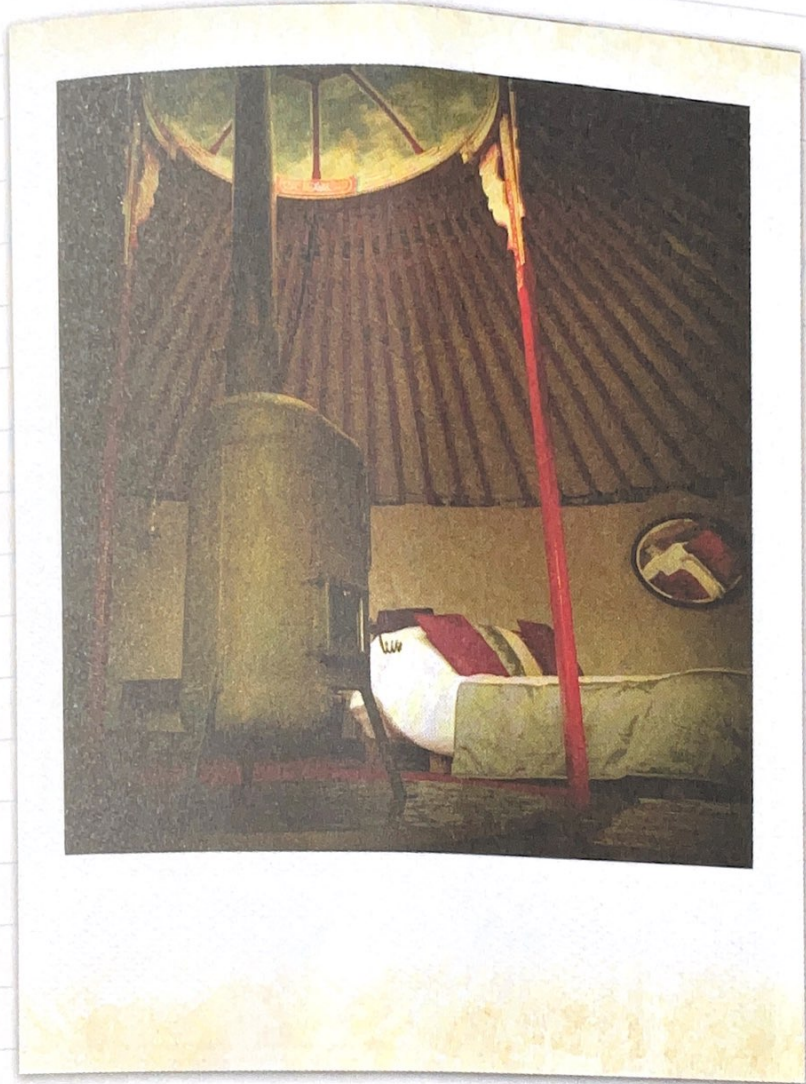
So we did. Inside, the air was warm and still, like the air of a different country. There was some kind of bamboo matting on the floor and a huge pile of cushions in one corner. We spread them in a circle on the floor and I noticed a gas heater. It had an ignition button, so I turned it on and we clustered round it.

The air started to smell of slightly toasted sand.













Nergui said, "Why have the people who lived here vanished?"

"I don't think they've vanished. I think they don't come here till the holidays."

Chingis had found some kind of storm lantern hanging from the central post. He lit it using the heater and took it outside.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"Sssh, watch."

Chingis set up the lantern on top of a log so that it threw a pool of light onto the side of the tent. Then he stood between the lantern and the tent and made shadows with his hands. Sitting inside looking at the shadows he was casting on the canvas we saw amazing shapes and stories. Chingis reached out his arm so that it looked like a horse's neck stretched out across the canvas, whinnying and neighing. He made a demon shape out of some cardboard he had in his bag.

Nergui screamed and told me to go out and make him stop.

I said, "Don't be thick – the pretend demon is putting fear in the real demon's face."

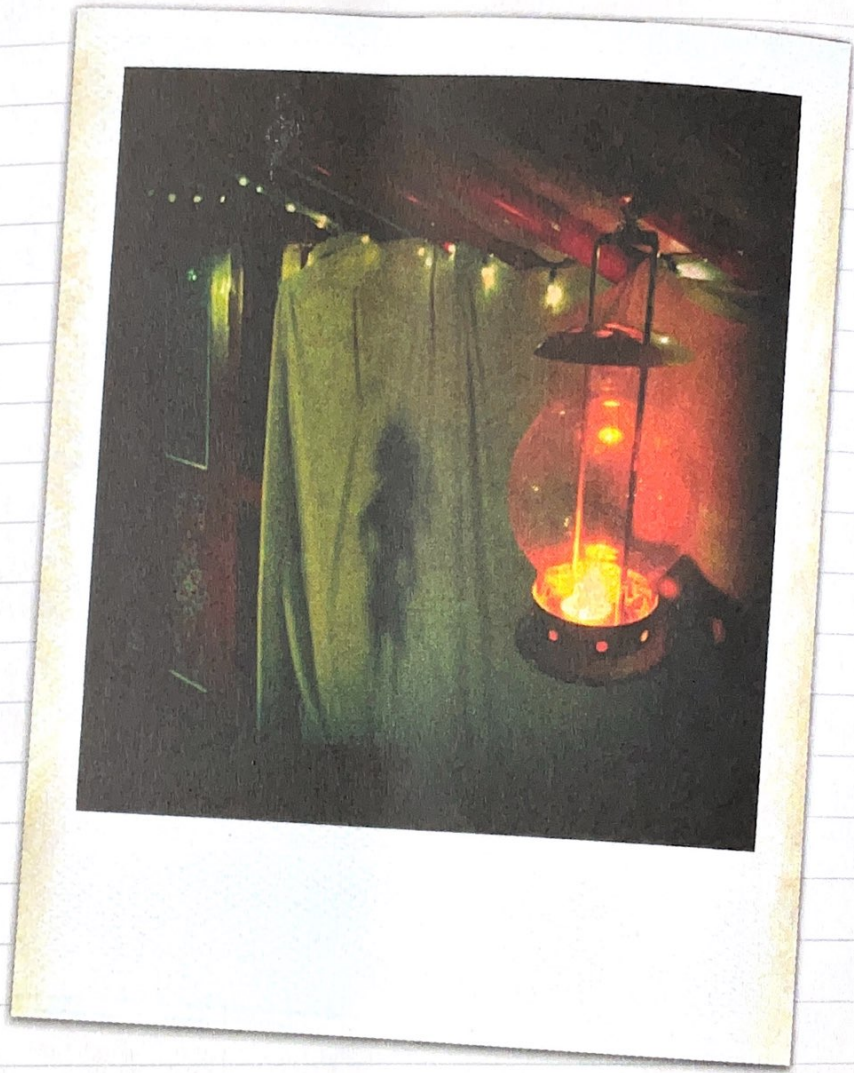
"Oh yeah. I never thought of that."

When Chingis made a girl shape with some grass for hair and did kissing noises, Nergui laughed till I thought he'd hurt himself.











Then Chingis came back inside and we all sat staring at the lantern. Someone's stomach started to complain. I was thinking, These two are nomads. Are they going to use their nomad skills to get food and water for us? I don't think so. In fact we wouldn't even be warm if the stove didn't have an ignition button. In my bag I still had my lunch. I spread out the food - a packet of Dairylea Lunchables, some Quavers, a Capri-Sun and a ham sandwich. The two of them just stared at it like these were the riches of Kublai Khan. Then I said, "Go ahead," and they dived on it. There was a bit of a discussion about how to share the Lunchables but we worked it out in the end and then just lay there, not chewing, just letting the cheese dissolve in our mouths. We took turns with the Capri-Sun. First we sucked the juice out and then we sucked the air. The noise it made as the plastic collapsed was hilarious for a while. Then it was really quiet. Except for when Nergui said, "What's that?!" every time a twig snapped or a pine cone fell outside.

I thought, These two don't know anything about being on your own and soon it'll be dark. Somehow I've come out here with two nomads and they've put me in charge!

I said, "Back in Mongolia they tell stories round the fire."

"Go on, then."

"OK. I'll tell you a ghost story. Unless you'd be scared."

"Scared?!" Chingis laughed. "We wouldn't be scared, would we, Nergui?"

"Not ever," said Nergui, looking around. "Where do you think everyone has gone?"

"I don't know," I said, and started the story. "There was this old man, in Italy I think it was..." I was telling them the only story I knew. "He was an undertaker – do you know what that is? He buried people. When they were dead. And he was also very greedy. He loved jewellery the most. Anyway, one day, someone brings him the body of an old lady to bury—"

"Exactly how scary is this story?" asked Nergui.

"Completely scary. Want me to stop?"

"No."

"So someone brings him the body of this old lady and she has a fabulous ring on one hand—"

"How fabulous?"

"Rubies."

"They're unlucky."

"Diamonds."

"OK."

"So he decides it'd be a waste to bury the ring. He's going to try and steal it. Well, he tries to pull it off.



Won't come. He rubs her hands with soap. Nothing. Still can't get the ring off. But the more he can't get it off, the more he wants it. So what does he do in the end?"

"Cuts off her hand." Chingis smiled. "That's what I'd do."

"And that's what he does – cuts off her hand. Then he folds her arms so no one will see. Then he sells the ring and buys himself a nice new car. Of course it's very hard to get rid of a hand without someone finding it and making a fuss, so he hides it in the glove compartment of his car.

"Anyway, one night, he's out driving in that nice new car and he comes to a crossroads. And he sees someone at the crossroads, standing there in the rain. So—"

"Oh, he doesn't stop, does he? Never stop at a crossroads," said Nergui.

"Well, he doesn't know that. And it's raining really hard and the person standing there is old. An old woman. So he feels sorry for her and stops. 'Do hop in,' he says. 'I'll take you where you want to go.'

"This old woman starts to climb in but it is quite a high-up car and not that easy to get into so the man very kindly says, 'Here, give me your hand.'

"And the old woman says" – I did this next bit in a spooky voice – "'You already have my hand...'"

As soon as I said that, Nergui screamed and ran out towards the woods.

We ran after him. But outside the tent, everything had changed. The sun had dropped by now. Our shadows stretched out in front of us, like wriggling flags, and the whole landscape seemed to be glowing. Chingis just went charging off, yelling, crunching twigs and scaring birds. I went after him, grabbed him and put my hand over his mouth to shut him up.

"Listen. We can't see him. So we've got to listen."

We held our breath. We listened. There was a scuffling somewhere off to the left. I picked up the storm lantern Chingis had used for the shadow show earlier and lifted it over my head as we walked slowly towards the sound.

Eyes. Bright-green luminous eyes staring into the light. They seemed to be floating in the air.

"The demon!" gasped Chingis.

"A fox," I said. I could see it trotting off into the long grass, its head and tail both pointing down.

A cry came from somewhere in the long, golden grass. Something was in there, making the grass wave, sending ripples of gold across the field.

I shouted, "Nergui, stay still. We're coming."

We trudged through the grass but we couldn't see him.



"He's vanished," said Chingis.

"Of course he hasn't vanished. Nergui! Shout to us again!"

He shouted but the voice seemed to come from nowhere. Or from everywhere.

"He's vanished. He's just a voice in the air."

Then a thought struck me. "Nergui, are you crouching down?"

"Yeah."

"Can you just stand up?"

And there he was, right in front of us.

"Idiot!" said Chingis.

I said, "Right, follow me." I could see the yellow of the gorse and it led me to the little white numbered posts. I counted them down – 13-12-11-10 – leading us back towards the road. Chingis and Nergui never asked where we were going. They just followed. Followed me all the way to the station and onto the train. We got off at Bootle New Strand. And they followed me, still not asking questions, all the way to Roberts Tower, clockwise round the pile of rubble, in at the main door and up in the lift. They just padded along behind me.

But then when I knocked on their door, Chingis exploded. "What?!" he shouted, as if he'd just woken up. "What're you doing? What've you brought us here for?"

"It's where you live. I can't look after you."

"You've cheated. You've cheated us. She's done us. Nergui, quick..."

Nergui spat at me. He was crying and shivering. Chingis was pounding on the lift button. You could barely hear the lift clunking up the shaft over Chingis's shouting. Then the door of the flat opened and he went quiet. His mother walked onto the landing. She didn't even look at me. She picked Nergui up and carried him inside.

The lift arrived. Its doors creaked open. Chingis stood there staring into it as if he might still step inside. His mother stood in the doorway watching him. Two doors. Two places to go. The lift doors began to close. Chingis turned around and walked through the lighted door, into the flat.

When I stepped towards the lift, the doors started to re-open. I looked back at the flat to see if the boys would say anything. Ask me in maybe. But nothing. Their mother closed the door and I stepped into the lift. The doors closed me in.

When I got home, I told my mum I'd been to Mimi's.