



eagle hood Coat.

That's not Nergui's coat in the picture. That's Chingis's coat. I saw that coat today for the first time since we all left. I'd heard that they were going to knock the school down this summer. As it was the last day of term and my last chance to take a look, I went over on my way back from work.

Mrs Spendlove was still working there, incredibly, and she recognized me right away. Thirty-four years she's taught there. Imagine that. She let me go round with her while she collected her stuff and some souvenirs. The old store cupboards, the cloakroom, her classroom. And there at the back of our old classroom was a big blue plastic tub with **LOST PROPERTY** written on it. Mostly trainers and socks and a few books, a lockable Miffy diary, a couple of *In the Night Garden* lunchboxes. And the coat.

The unforgettable coat of Chingis Tuul.

I lifted it out and held it up at arm's length. I wish I could say it looked like a bird, but it was more like a big hairy bat, just hanging there. I went through the pockets, the way you do.

And that's how I found these pictures.











demon eat this.

I really did take my Good Guide duties seriously. I took Chingis and Nergui to the dining hall every lunchtime and made sure they could sit together – even though I didn't have dinners myself. I made sure they knew what they had to bring for games and swimming. I told them to lose their weird-looking coats and wear something normal. And when it was our class assembly, I lobbied for it to be "All About Mongolia", thinking that Chingis would join in and maybe even be pleased. But it didn't work out that way.

I brought in pictures and looked stuff up on Wikipedia for the first time in my life. He did nothing. Even on the day, he just stood there, looking Mongolian, while I told the school all I had learned about how Mongolia, a landlocked presidential republic in Central Asia, was the most sparsely populated country in the world, where a lot of the people were still nomads who lived in big tents called yurts and the men liked to hunt wolves with eagles. And how there was a city there called Xanadu, which was the fifth Great Khan's summer capital. It had fountains and brooks and meadows and woods that were full of every

kind of wild beast, and the Khan went hunting with his eagles there. The palace itself was made of tightly woven bamboo so that it could be taken apart and moved. Inside, it was all painted with birds and animals and trees so that you couldn't really tell if you were inside or out.

When someone said, "Is it really like that where you come from?" Chingis said, "Yes. Nothing has changed."

"What did you come to Bootle for, then?"

When everyone sniggered, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "We are nomads. We move around."

I didn't do all this out of the goodness of my heart. It was part of my plan: I wanted to be asked back to their house. I imagined it would be stuffed with silks, with a horse-head fiddle in one corner and a samovar bubbling in the other. I really had done my homework.

Thanks to my obsession with Mimi's make-up, I already knew a bit about getting yourself asked back to places. All you had to do was walk with someone until they were nearly home then say, "Oh, is this where you live?" and if that wasn't enough, just say you needed the toilet. Once you were through the door, their mother usually asked you to stay.

This didn't work with Chingis and Nergui, though, for the simple reason that they seemed to

take a different route home every day. One day they'd head left up Hawthorne Road, so the next day I'd go that way and wait for them to catch up. I'd wait for ages and then discover they'd gone off down the Avenue. So the next day I'd go that way, only to see them turn round and walk back the way they had come, heading straight past me. Sometimes they'd disappear into the terraces. Sometimes they'd even slide off into the back alleys.

I gave up trying to follow them, but whenever I was out I would look at the windows of the houses and flats, wondering if one of them was theirs and feeling certain that somewhere in the narrow streets or tower blocks there was a room with the silks and the samovar, like a secret gateway.

Somewhere in Bootle, Xanadu was buried like treasure.

Then one day I went into Savedra's shop for a packet of Monster Munch and a bottle of Sunny Delight, and there they were, the two of them, standing in the doorway looking at me. Chingis said, "Are they good?" pointing at the Monster Munch. I offered him some and started walking slowly towards my house.

Chingis crunched the Munch. "Yes, it is good. You can give some to Nergui."

We walked along, with them dipping into my Monster Munch every couple of metres. I subtly changed course whenever they changed theirs. I chugged some Sunny Delight so I could be convincing when I asked for the toilet. But somehow, we ended up outside my house, not theirs.

"I need the toilet," said Chingis. "And so does Nergui. You have toilets?"

"Sure. Come in."

As soon as they came through the door, my mum asked if they wanted to stay to tea.

"Sure," said Chingis.

He and Nergui went up to the toilet. Mum asked me if I thought they'd like fish fingers. "Or is that against their religion?"

"I'm not sure what religion they are. They eat normal school dinners."

We heard the toilet flush but the boys did not come down. We could hear them walking around upstairs, opening doors and even drawers.

"That's a bit much, you know. Doors are one thing but I draw the line at drawers."

She couldn't, in fact, draw the line, though, because Chingis walked into the kitchen and said, "Please, we need to bake something right away. You have flour?"

Something in his voice managed to infect Mum

with baking panic. Personally, I'd never heard of emergency baking before. But Mum was yanking a mixing bowl out of the cupboard like it was a fire extinguisher. Bags of flour, slabs of butter – she threw them onto the table like medical supplies.

“Yeast?”

“Yeast?! We don't have yeast!”

It seemed that we might all be doomed by lack of yeast and that only Chingis could save us.

“It's OK,” he said. “This time I'll do it without yeast. Stand back, please. And warm the oven.”

Mum more or less ran to the oven and Chingis started throwing stuff into the mixing bowl and bashing the dough about. Nergui stood there watching as though this was heart surgery and it was his heart in the mixing bowl.

It was only when I said, “What is it exactly that you're doing?” that things started to calm down.

“Yeah,” said Mum. “What is it exactly that you're doing?”

“You have some raisins?” asked Chingis.

“Sure.” She passed him a bag of raisins. He squeezed the dough into the shape of a little boy and added raisins for teeth and eyes.

“You know, if we're going to eat this, you should have washed your hands.”

"This is not for eating. Not for *us* to eat, anyway. We need something else to eat. What do you have?"

Mum said that she was thinking of eating fish fingers if it wasn't against their religion.

"There is a religion in this country that forbids fish fingers?" asked Chingis.

"No, I don't think so. I'll put them on. Do you want to phone your mother and tell her you're staying to tea?"

"No. We are nomads. She doesn't expect us to come home like children who are not nomads. Maybe we will be staying here for the night."

"Oh, will you, maybe?" said Mum. "Maybe you won't, either."

Chingis glanced at Nergui. Then he looked around the room, as if checking that no one was listening. Mum had this mirror near the back door next to the See How I Grow chart. Chingis went over, took the mirror off the wall and turned it face down on the table. Then he closed the blind.

"We are telling you something in secret," he said. He looked at Nergui again and Nergui nodded. "My brother believes he is being chased by a certain demon."

"A demon?" said Mum. "In Bootle? Are you sure there's only one?!"

"We have to take steps to save him. For instance, Nergui is not his name. We never speak his name. Nergui means no one, so if the demon hears us speaking to Nergui, it thinks we are speaking to no one."

"Right," said Mum. "Well. Obviously. Don't know why I didn't think of it myself."

"Also, we take a different route home from school each night so that it can't easily find where we live."

"But it does know where you go to school?"

"He saw it in school. Twice."

"So he has actually seen this demon, then?"

"Of course. Or how would he know it was following him? We are not people who are afraid for no reason."

"Course not. So what does it look like?"

"It's in disguise. It looks like an ordinary man."

"So ... how do you know it's a demon?"

"Because it wants to make him vanish. It's a demon that makes things vanish."

"Right," said Mum.

"That's why we had to leave Mongolia. This demon was there. It wanted to make us vanish. So we had to leave. We walked along the railway track that led out of our country. We followed the railway for days and days. Until we came to here."

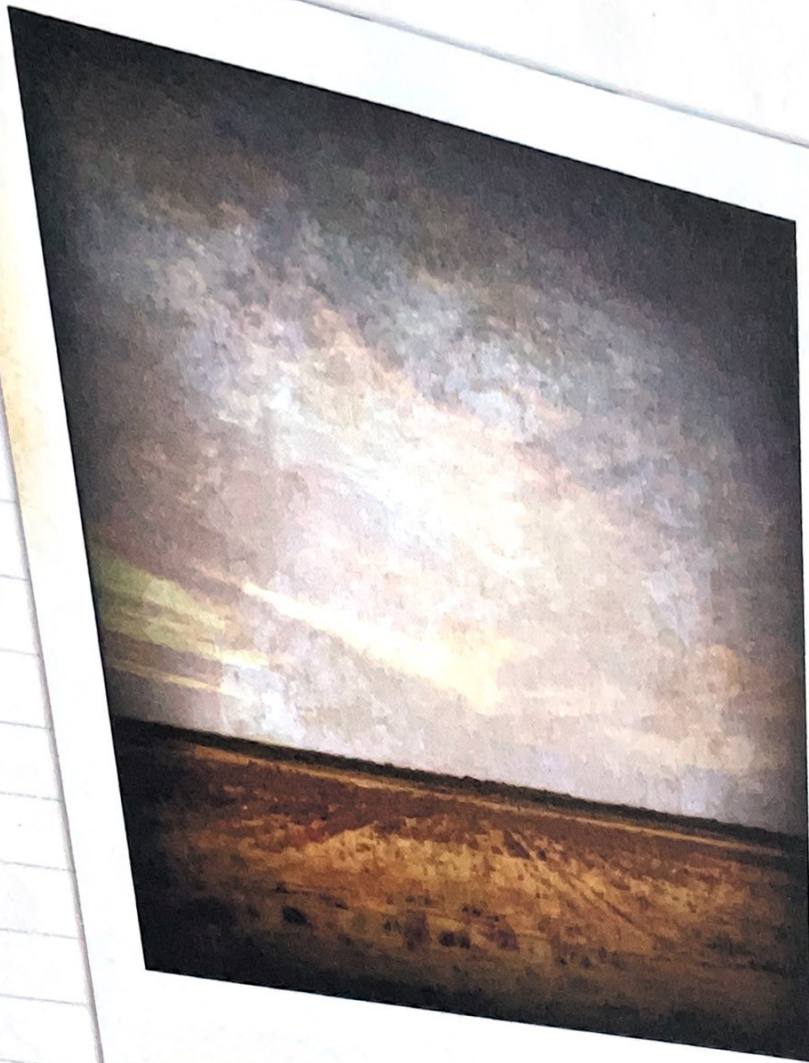
"There's a direct rail link from here to Mongolia?! Really?"

"Not direct, no. We make many changes. We do it to confuse the demon. And now I have made this boy out of dough. If we leave him on your doorstep, then maybe if the demon has followed us, it can think that this is Nergui. And maybe that will vanish instead."

"Great plan," said Mum. "Now if you're going to eat fish fingers, go and wash your hands."

So they stayed to supper. Before they ate, they put the dough boy on the doorstep. While we were eating, we watched the door. We couldn't help it. The lights as the cars went by, the voices of passing people, they all seemed like demon-related activities to me.

A few weeks before, I had not known that there was any such thing as a portable bamboo palace. I hadn't even known there was such a person as Chingis Khan, who had been born with a clot of blood grasped in his fist and who had conquered nearly the entire world in hardly any time at all, sweeping over the steppe into Central Asia and right up to the very gates of Europe. I hadn't even known there was such a place as the steppe! The steppe that was flat as a pavement but wide as a sea, with nothing but grass and Great Bustards. Wide as a sea and I hadn't even known it was there. If there were



seas of grass and woven palaces in this world, why
wouldn't there be demons too? And why wouldn't
one of them be crouched on our doorstep in William
Morris Road right that minute, munching a boy made
of dough?

* * *

Chingis cleared the plates without being asked. Nergui stayed staring at the door, looking tense.

"I think that little fella wants his mother," said Mum.

"I'll see if it's safe," said Chingis.

He opened the door and looked down at the step. The dough boy had disappeared.

"Honestly," said Mum, "you could leave a bucket of nuclear waste on your doorstep round here and it would be gone in five minutes. They really will nick anything."

"We can go home," said Chingis. "The demon has eaten the dough boy. It won't need to eat again tonight."

