

The next day, Chingis came to school in his coat again and didn't take it off even when it was time to go to class. When I said, "Hey, it's not Own Clothes Day any more," he didn't even look at me.

When he sat down, Mrs Spendlove also said, "Chingis, it's not Own Clothes Day any more."

"Yeah, and these aren't me own clothes, are they?" said Chingis. "They're me grandad's, see what I'm saying?"

He was doing his pretending-not-to-understand thing again but it wasn't really that convincing now he had a thick Scouse accent. Mrs Spendlove said, "Just step outside, go to the cloakroom and hang the coat up."

Chingis slouched out of the room. Mrs Spendlove rolled her eyes and Shocky said something like, "What d'you expect? He is named after Chingis Khan."

I said, "And what do you know about Chingis Khan, then?"

"Yes," said Mrs Spendlove. "And what do you know about Chingis Khan?"

He was supposed to say, "Nothing, Miss," but in fact he stood up and delivered this whole lecture. "Chingis Khan was born in 1100 and something. He had red hair. When he grew up, he conquered and what for? All he was ever interested in was horses. He just went round conquering countries and killing loads of people so he could have more horses. Like, he'd capture a city and they'd say, 'What d'you want to do with it?' And he'd be like, 'I know! Let's knock it down and we'll have a bit more room for our horses.' Or someone would come to him who'd discovered a new country and they'd be like, 'The people there have wings and they can read minds and they've got a city that floats in the air,' or something, and he'd be like, 'Have they got any horses? No? Can't be bothered then.'"

I said, "But they were nomads. Horses were very important. They needed horses to survive. And for status. People nowadays, they use their cars to show their status."

"So if Chingis was alive today," said Shocky, "it would be cars instead of horses. He'd kill everyone so he could grab their cars and then he'd tarmac

the whole of Europe so he could drive wherever he wanted."

It was hard to believe that I was actually having any kind of conversation with Shocky, let alone one about the history of the Mongol Empire. Afterwards, Mimi put it like this: "He obviously fancies you – otherwise why would he look up all that stuff about horses or whatever?"

Mrs Spendlove broke into the Great Mongolian History Debate to ask, "Where actually *is* Chingis? He was only supposed to go and hang up his coat. Duncan, go and get him."

So Duncan went to get him. But he'd already gone. His coat was hanging up in the cloakroom but there was no sign of him. Mrs Spendlove said we should just concentrate on the lesson and let him sulk if he wanted to.

"He's probably gone to kill someone and then have a drink out of his skull. That's what the original Chingis did – and they're still naming their kids after him! Imagine that. Imagine if Germans called their kids Adolf. And then imagine if people followed those kids home every night and taught them how to play football and swapped coats with them and everything." Shocky was bright red by the time he'd finished.

I said, "At least they're polite enough to talk to

people and not just ignore someone for an entire year!"

"Excuse me," said Mrs Spendlove, "could you two old married people take your domestic disputes somewhere else?"

Married?! What was she on about?

By lunchtime there was still no sign of Chingis, and when I looked on the blue playground there was no sign of Nergui, either. No one else seemed that worried. Kids did sag from our school quite a bit – and anyway, Chingis seemed like he could look after himself. Only I had seen those faces at the door the night before. I knew about the fear that was in their house.

So I went through the pockets of the coat. I was trying to help. I found two tiny plastic chairs and a table, like from a doll's house. I seemed to know them from somewhere but I couldn't think where. There was also a rolled-up notebook, with all his Polaroids stuck inside like Top Trumps cards. I flicked through the Polaroids. I came across the one of the oasis in the Gobi Desert – the one with the strange, flower-like trees. Under the trees was a table and two chairs, the same chairs and table I was holding in my hand. I looked at the photograph again. They weren't flower-like trees at all. They were just flowers. And I knew which flowers.



I took the pictures, the notebook and the doll's furniture out to the clump of trees where the Lost Tribe of Year Five lived. There were long, skinny flowers growing between the trees. I put the doll's furniture in between them, then crouched down and squinted. It took me about two minutes to find a perfect match. I swear I even found the tiny imprints of the table legs in the soil.

The magical Mongolian oasis was behind the bins in our school yard.

The ovoos with the horse's skull – when I looked again – was the pile of rubble in the car park of Roberts Tower.

What other wonders of the world were actually in Bootle?

There was also a Polaroid of two railway lines striking out across a flat prairie. Probably this was the railway line they had followed by foot on the epic journey across the steppe and along the Silk Road when they were trying to escape from the terrible demon.

Either that or it was the Merseyrail to Southport, which runs behind our school.

I rolled up the notebook, put it back in the coat pocket and sneaked out through the blue playground. It was the easiest way out. If anyone stopped you, you could say you were going after a stray football. I walked

up to the station, stood on the platform and peered down the track. It looked completely different from the photo – it was all houses and flyover – except that the rails were identical. So I started to follow them.



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I had been crashing through the nettles and broken bottles along the tracks for about five minutes when I heard this strange, high-pitched singing coming from the rails. I looked behind me. There was a blob of bright blue light hovering over the rails. A train was coming. I didn't think about it. I ran back to the platform and jumped on board the train.

For five minutes there was nothing outside the window but more houses and the rest of the flyover. Then something flashed in the sun. A mountain of scrap metal, towering over the Seaforth dock, shining in the hot afternoon sun. Metal mountains.

After that came the fields. I'd had no idea till then how close our house was to cows and horses. How come no one had ever mentioned it? Maybe no one knew. Maybe I was discovering an unknown country that everyone had missed even though it was so near by.

After the fields came the trees. I put the Polaroid of the Mongolian forest up against the window as the train clunked into Freshfield Station. They were the same trees. Definitely.

So I got off. And I walked up the road and into the trees. Someone went by with a dog and smiled at me. Like it was fine for me to be there. A couple went past with a pushchair with massive wheels. They said hello

too. Then it was just trees and dark, worrying shadows in among the trees, and sometimes scratching sounds, though I could usually tell that it was just birds. And once I saw a squirrel. I was off the road now, following a sandy path. Every now and then there was a little white post with a number on it. Which made me feel like I was going the right way for something, though I didn't know what...



Then, all of a sudden, Nergui was walking next to me.

I didn't see it happen. I just sort of felt someone there and then I saw him from the corner of my eye. "Where's Chingis?" I asked.

"Just coming. How come you got here before us? We thought we'd have to wait all night for you to catch up."

"I caught the train."

"Oh."

"How did you know I was coming?"

"You're our Good Guide. It's your job."

We sat on a log and waited for Chingis.

Chingis didn't seem that surprised to see me, either.

"Which way now?" was all he said.

I was quite buzzed by the way they just expected me to be there, in a forest. No one else has ever expected me to just be there in a forest for them. I liked being the Good Guide so I said, "This way," like I knew what I was doing, and carried on following the numbered posts. Although it looked like we were at the end of the world, I knew there was a train every fifteen minutes that would take us back to Bootle in twenty-three minutes.

The whole thing reminded me of when a dream gets weird and you're sort of scared but you also

somehow know that you could wake yourself up and you'd be in your own bed, so you carry on dreaming just a bit longer. And that's what we did. We carried on walking.

When we spotted a pile of logs and twigs up ahead, I pointed at them like I'd arranged for them to be there and said, "I thought you might want to make an ovoo or something."

"Yeah. Good idea."

So the three of us piled the wood up into a pyramid and Nergui went off and found a long branch to stick in the top like a flagpole. We tied my school jumper to it for a flag – even though it was getting cold. Then Chingis opened his bag and pulled out a horse skull.

"Where did you get that?"

"From my grandad's horse."

"Right. Well, obviously *that* would be in your schoolbag."

He put the skull on top of the ovoo.

I said, "Are we going to walk round it now three times in a clockwise direction?"

"Yes," said Chingis. "Which way is clockwise?"

I showed them, but Nergui was unconvinced.

"Anyway," he said, "it all depends on the clock, doesn't it?"

I pointed out that all clocks go the same way.

"Of course they do," said Chingis. "You are so stupid."

So we agreed that all clocks went the same way but none of us could agree which way that was. Even I wasn't sure – we've only got a digital clock on our computer. So we went round what I thought was clockwise and then we went the other way – just in case. And then Nergui started to worry that by going one way and then the other, we were undoing what we'd only just done.

I said, "We could make a fire but it's illegal."

"I don't want to break the law," said Nergui.

"We could dance. Dancing's not illegal."

They both stared at me.

"You're supposed to light a fire and then dance around it."

They both stared at me even more.

Then Chingis said, "Let's move on, then, lads."

So we moved on. And I explained to them that you could build a mental ovoo in your head if you wanted, and put all your good memories on it and a mental flag on top.

The trees grew thinner and then we came to a field. It might have been a cornfield – some kind of long grass, anyway. I said we definitely weren't supposed to walk through that. You could see that no one else ever

had. But Chingis was dead keen. "It will fully baffle that demon," he said. "You walk next to me and Nergui will walk behind me so it'll look like the tracks of two people, not three. It will sack him off completely."

We trudged through the waist-high grass. Frightened birds flew up around us, whistling and beeping like little fax machines. And the corn rustled like wrapping paper. Chingis pulled the Polaroid camera out of his bag and took a picture of the tracks.



I said, "Chingis, where did you get that camera?"

"Refugee Project Summer Holiday Party in St Anne's, Overbury Street. Won it on the tombola."

"They had a bouncy castle too," added Nergui.

So that was this summer here in Liverpool? So you didn't have that camera when you were in Mongolia? So none of your photos is actually of Mongolia? Are you even from Mongolia? But I didn't say any of that.

Chingis shook the Polaroid dry and showed it to me. The funny thing was, it looked like Mongolia, as though he could turn bits of Liverpool into bits of Mongolia just by pointing his camera at them.

We carried on making our way through the field until we came out the other side. Now it was just sand in front of us, all the way to the sky.

"The desert," said Nergui.

"We are back in the desert, where we belong," said Chingis.

I said, "I think this is the beach, to be honest."

"If it's the beach, where's the sea?"

"Over there, behind the dunes."

"Honestly, this is the desert. Welcome to our desert!" And he took another picture – and he turned the beach into the desert with his camera. He gave me this photo and the one of the cornfield.

I made the boys slog up the dunes. The wind was

throwing sand in our eyes and that really sharp grass was cutting my legs. I didn't care – I just wanted to show them that the sea was there and that they were wrong.

But when we got to the top of the dunes, there was no sea. Nothing. Just miles and miles of sand and mud shining in the sun.

"See!" said Chingis. "The desert."

I said, "The tide is out."

"No tide goes that far out," said Chingis.

