

"Cottrell Boyce is
warm, funny and
totally original."
Daily Mail


THE
UN-
FORGOTTEN
COAT
**Frank
Cottrell
Boyce**

From the bestselling author of *Millions*





our good guide



I hadn't seen this photograph since the day it was taken, until now. Even so, I can tell you anything you want to know about it. The boy on the left is Shocky. The one on the right is Duncan, who used to come to school with biscuits in his pocket. He's married now, inexplicably. The girl on the left is Mimi Toolan and the one on the right is me.

At the moment the picture was taken, I was mostly wondering whether Mimi would ask me back to hers after school. Mimi's mother let her play with her make-up, which my mother definitely did not, even though I was mature and sophisticated.

I was also thinking Oh. My. Days. Shocky has put his hand on my shoulder! Once, just before Christmas, I had managed to manipulate Shocky into being my partner in a classroom activity. This should

have resulted in a moment of physical contact because it was a trust game, only it turned out that Shocky was not to be trusted. And by the time this photograph was taken, Shocky had completed an unbroken run of two hundred and thirty-seven days of failing to notice my existence.

How do I remember my thoughts so clearly? Because those were the only thoughts I had in the first two terms of Year Six:

1. Mimi, can I come back to yours?

2. Shocky, please notice me.

Also, this photograph was taken in the summer term of Year Six. And doesn't everyone remember everything about their last summer in primary school? The sports day. The leavers' trip. The leavers' photograph. The endless discussion of which school you were going to next, the promise to stay friends even though you were going to different schools. Everyone signing their names on everyone else's shirts on the last afternoon. And all the time, you had the feeling that day by day, inch by inch, a door was opening and sunshine was pouring in, and any day now you would be allowed out through that door,

laughing and yelling so loud that you wouldn't even hear when it closed behind you, for ever.

I can tell you when it was taken. It was the second week of the summer term. During morning break, Mimi spotted two kids – one big and one little, the big one holding the little one's hand – staring through the railings of the playground. The little one was wearing a furry hat and they had identical coats. Mad coats – long, like dressing-gowns, with fur inside. But any coat would have looked mad. The sun was beating down. The tarmac in the car park was melting. Everyone else was wearing T-shirts.

Mimi went over and said, "What are you two looking at?"

The big one put his finger on his lips, shushing her, and said, "Pay attention to your teacher." He pointed at Mrs Spendlove, and the very minute he did, she blew the whistle for the end of break, like he knew she was going to do it.

When we were all lined up, somehow these two were standing right behind me. I was looking at the littlest one, who had his hat pulled down right over his eyes. It looked so uncomfortable; I wanted to fix it for him – but the big one put his hand under my chin and turned my head away. "Don't look at him," he said.

He was asking for a slap, quite honestly. But before I could do anything about that, Mrs Spendlove was walking us into class. The two boys went straight to the back and the little one made himself at home in what was supposedly my seat. I stood there, staring right at him, thinking he'd take a hint. But no.

Mrs Spendlove said, "Everyone, I'd like you all to say a big hello to a new face in our class. A happy new face, I hope. This is Chingis."

Everyone said hello except me. I said, "What about the other one, Miss? What's he called?"

She hadn't noticed the little one until then. "Oh. Chingis," she said, "I'm afraid your little brother isn't in this class. He's in Miss Hoyle's class just along the corridor."

"No," said Chingis, "my little brother is in this class. Look, he's here next to me."

Everyone laughed except Mrs Spendlove. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "I mean he *belongs* in Miss Hoyle's class." She was flapping her hands at the rest of us to be quiet, mortified because she thought we were laughing at him and it was her fault. But I was standing next to him and I could see he hadn't made a mistake.

He was digging in.

"Julie, would you show Chingis's brother to Miss Hoyle's class?"

I certainly would. For one thing, I wanted my seat back.

As soon as I stepped towards the little one, though, the big one put his hand up, right in my face, and said, "No."

"Excuse me?"

"He must stay with me. I am bound to take care of him. Protect him. I must stay with him."

"Well, it doesn't really work like that, Chingis. For one thing, once he's in Miss Hoyle's class, she'll protect him. And besides, he won't really need protecting because..."

He wasn't even listening. He just took out some pencils and stuff and settled down to do a bit of drawing.

Mrs Spendlove opened up her laptop and poked around for a while. "Ah," she said, talking to the little one directly. "You need to go to a different class, Kub—" and started trying to spell out this unbelievable name, syllable by syllable. Before she got to the third syllable, Chingis looked up and said, "No," again.

"No," just like that.

It was the second time he'd said no to her. Once might be a mistake. Twice was game on. Definitely. We were witnessing a struggle for power.

Mrs Spendlove made the first play. "Excuse me?" she said.

"Call him Nergui," he said. "It's easier." Which was definitely cheek in her face, telling Mrs Spendlove what to do, telling her she wouldn't be up to the job of pronouncing someone's actual name.

Mrs Spendlove slapped that down. "Well, that's not what I've got here," she said, and tried spelling out the long name again.

Chingis stood up.

She looked him in the eye.

He said, "Please."

Please was good. *Please* was some kind of stand-down.

Please was definitely points to her.

She closed the laptop really, really slowly. "OK," she said. "Just for today, you can stay in this class, Nergui."

Chingis said thank you and sat back down. It looked like victory to Mrs Spendlove. Except that somehow this kid had ended up with everything he wanted – his little brother was sitting next to him, being called by some unofficial name. Maybe Mrs Spendlove sensed this. Maybe that's why she decided she had to push it.

"So, if you take your hat off, Nergui," she said, "we can all get started."

The kid didn't move and neither did Chingis. They both just sat there, with *What're you going to do about it?* faces. Pretending they didn't understand.

She tried again. "I'm afraid you have to take your hat off, Nergui."

"No," said Chingis.

Now everyone looked at Mrs Spendlove.

"We can't have people wearing hats in class, Chingis."

Everyone looked at Chingis.

This was like watching high-tension tennis.

"It will be dangerous to take off my brother's hat."

"How can it be dangerous to take off his hat? Is his head not securely fastened to his neck?"

She got a laugh for that. The laugh gave her some edge.

"Not dangerous for him. Dangerous for you."

Mrs Spendlove frowned. Was he threatening her?

"If I take off his hat," he continued, "maybe he will go insane and kill everyone."

He was definitely threatening her. Threatening all of us. With his little brother.

"Chingis..."

"When you need your eagle to be calm, what do you do?"

"I don't know." She looked around the class. Did anyone know? Why *would* anyone know?

"Of course," he said, "you cover its eyes with a hood. When you want the eagle to fly and kill, you take

off the hood. My brother is my eagle. With his hood on, he is calm enough. Without his hood, I don't know what he will be like."

Year Six. We had been at school for six years and until that moment I thought I had probably learned all I would ever need to learn. I knew how to work out the volume of a cube. I knew who had painted the "Sunflowers". I could tell you the history of St Lucia. I knew about lines of Tudors and lines of symmetry and the importance of eating five portions of fruit a day. But in all that time, I had never had a single lesson in eagle-calming. I had never even heard the subject mentioned. I'd had no idea that a person might need eagle-calming skills.

And in that moment, I felt my own ignorance spread suddenly out behind me like a pair of wings, and every single thing I didn't know was a feather on those wings. I could feel them tugging at the air, restless to be airborne.

I wanted to talk to the new boy. I wanted to talk about eagles. But Mimi seemed to regard the whole Chingis incident as a minor interruption in the ongoing global cosmetics conversation. Only the boys were interested. At lunchtime, dozens of them crowded round Chingis and Nergui, asking them if they really had eagles, and

how big they were, and whether Chingis was a liar or not.

"Where d'you get eagles from, then? Eagles R Us?"

"Everyone has eagles where I come from."

"Where's that, then?"

"Mongolia."

They poked and pestered little Nergui, who still had his hat pulled right down, hiding his eyes. They kept telling him to make eagle noises. The kid – Nergui – huddled down in his coat, pulled his arms out of his sleeves and crossed them over his chest. His sleeves were flapping loose and he did fully look like a bird.

Then Chingis spotted me over their heads and shouted, "You. You must come and help me."

I didn't know what he expected me to do. But I was fully delighted to be asked. I slid past the boys and then turned on them. "All right," I said. "Move on. Haven't you seen a pair of Mongolian brothers before?"

"No."

"Well, you have now. So move on."

"As if they're Mongolian, anyway." It was Shocky. "Why would they come here from Mongolia? They're probably from Speke."

Everyone agreed that the brothers were probably from Speke and then went back to their footie.

"Please stand still," said Chingis. He moved me back a bit and pulled something out of his bag that looked

like an old-fashioned radio. When he pressed a button, it made this whirring sound, the top half shot open and a lens popped out.

I know now that it was a Polaroid camera. At the time I think I thought it was some kind of mad, starey cuckoo clock.

"I need a picture," he said, "so I can remember which one you are. You are to be our Good Guide here. OK?"

Mimi had come over by this point – she could hear a camera being deployed at five hundred metres. We both did our loveliest smiles, and that would be when Shocky and Duncan came over and tried to get into the picture. Almost as soon as Chingis had clicked the button, a strip of paper rolled out of the front of the camera. He peeled off some kind of label, then waved the paper around in the air, and there we all were. Caught for ever. He wrote something on the photo, which I didn't see at the time.

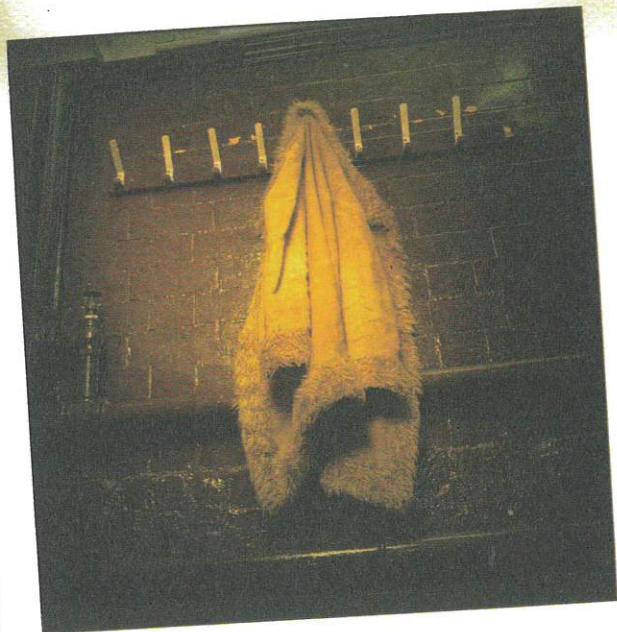
I saw it for the first time today. He'd written, "Our Good Guide."

"You will be our Good Guide," he said. "In Mongolia we are nomads. When we come to a new country, we need to find a Good Guide. You will be our Good Guide in this place. Agree?"

Of course I agreed. No one had ever asked me to

be anything before, definitely not anything involving a title. And that was when I stopped thinking about make-up, lips and Shocky. That was when I started walking round the place thinking, Hi, I'm the Good Guide.

I really did want to be a good guide.



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.

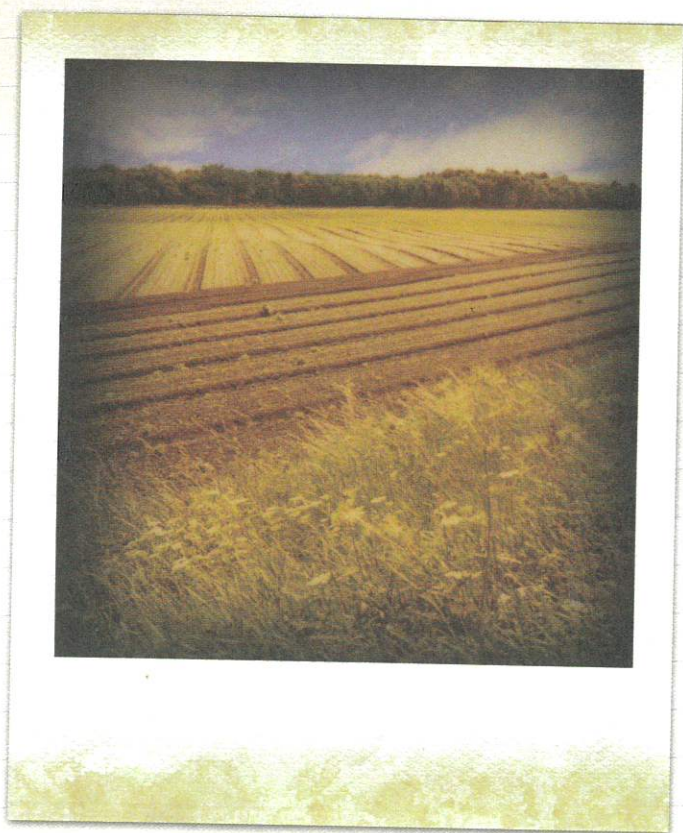
Mrs Spendlove was still working there, incredibly, and she recognized me right away. Thirty-four years she's taught there. Imagine that. She let me go round with her while she collected her stuff and some souvenirs. The old store cupboards, the cloakroom, her classroom. And there at the back of our old 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.

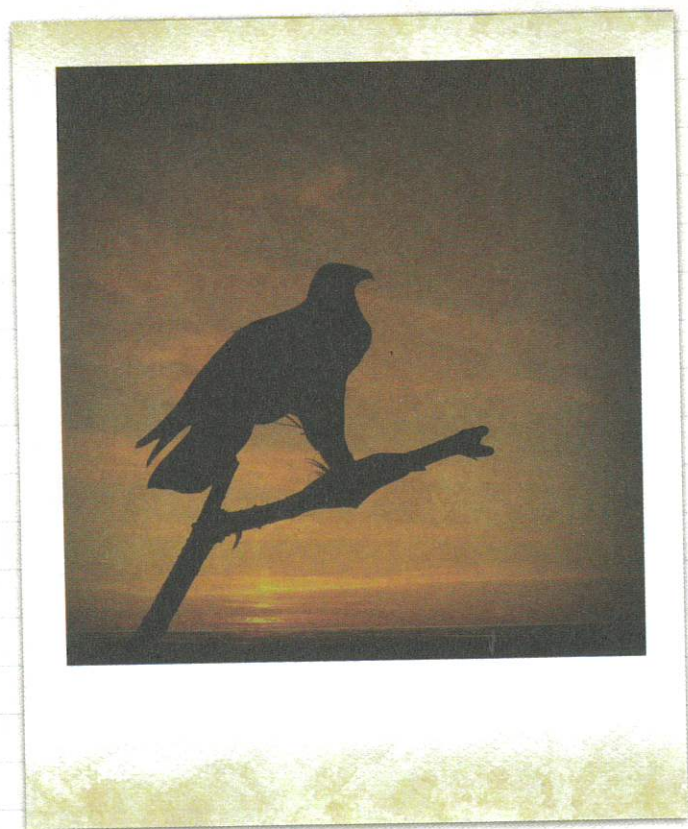
The unforgettable coat of Chingis Tuul.

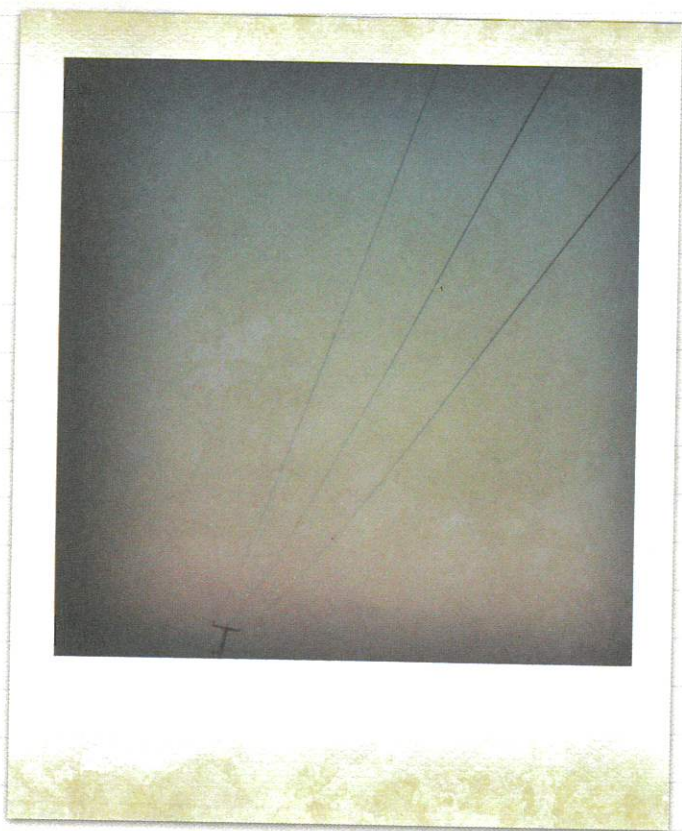
I lifted it out and held it up at arm's length. I wish I could say it looked like a bird, but it was more like a big hairy bat, just hanging there. I went through the pockets, the way you do.

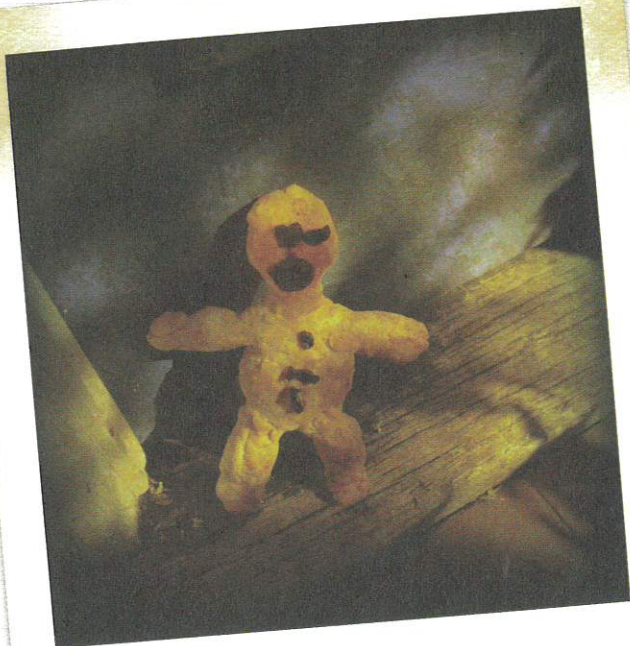
And that's how I found these pictures.











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."

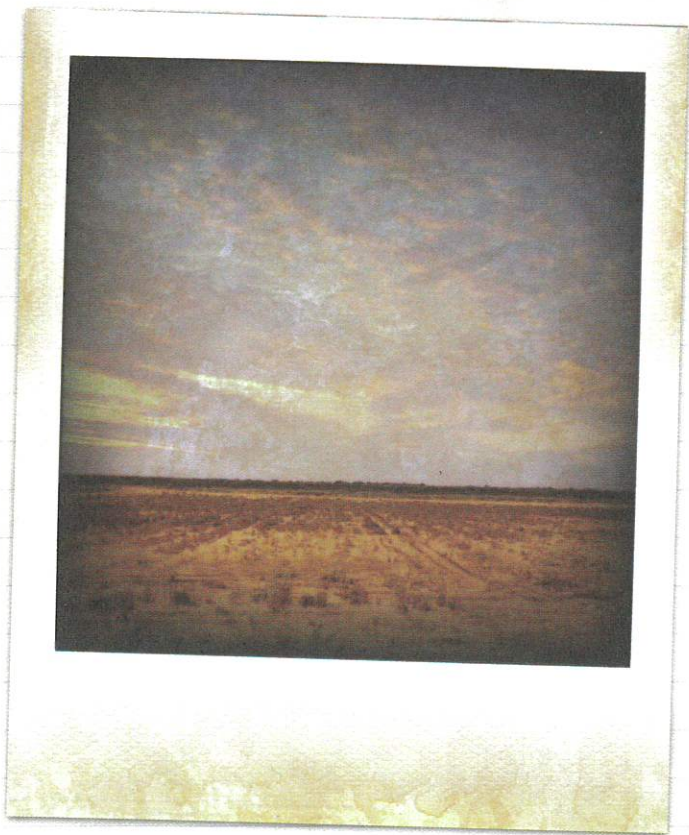
"There's a direct rail link from here to Mongolia?! Really?"

"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."

ui

