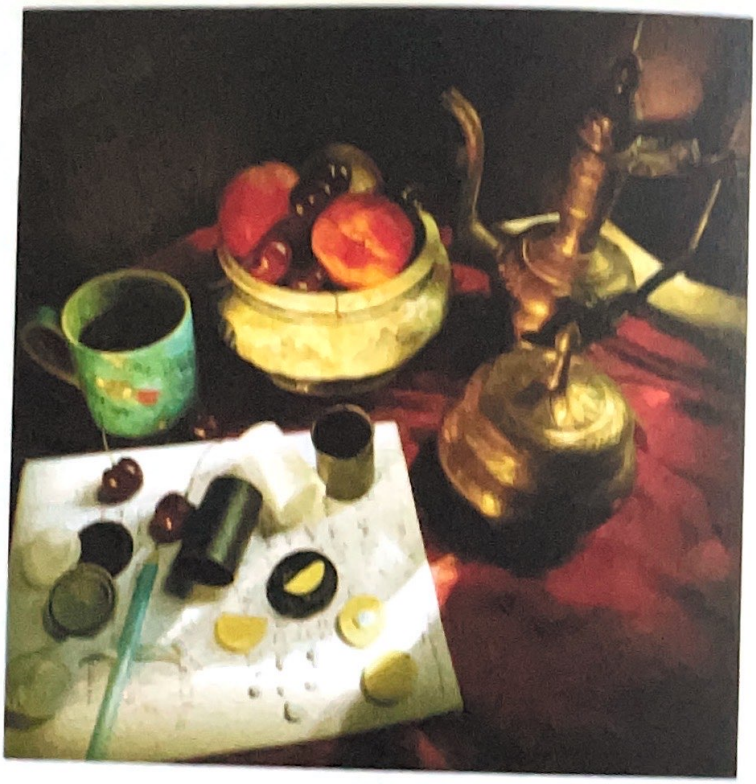

£1. one pound.

I remember this one too. One day, Mrs Spendlove made this announcement that we were going to do an experiment the next day and we were all supposed to bring in a little canister, like an old-fashioned plastic film canister. "You are bound to have one hanging around your house," she said. "We're going to make our own rockets."

But when the next day came, no one had brought one in. She seemed disappointed. "I wanted you all to do this yourselves," she said. "I've only got three so I'm afraid you'll all have to watch instead."

Anyway, she did this experiment where she stuck an Alka-Seltzer to the inside of the lid of one of the canisters with Blu-Tack, then she poured some water in the canister, put the lid on and turned it upside down. No one was that interested, until about two minutes later when the canister shot up to the ceiling and hit a light bulb, spraying water everywhere. Suddenly everyone wanted a go but Mrs Spendlove made this big speech about how you only get out what you put in, and how since none of us had gone to the bother of finding a canister, we would all just have to copy out some diagrams about the expansion of gases and propulsion and stuff, instead of having fun.

As soon as little playtime began, Chingis went to the quiet-corner benches and announced that he had film canisters, Blu-Tack and Alka-Seltzer all available for a pound a time. He opened his bag. He must have had thirty plastic film canisters, a massive slab of Blu-Tack and a catering pack of Alka-Seltzer.

"You can buy from me your own small rocket," he said. "One film canister, one stick of Blu-Tack and an Alka-Seltzer – a pound."

Everyone wanted one. People were pushing around him, handing over money.

I said, "You brought these in but you didn't tell Mrs Spendlove? Why?" I'd felt sorry for her.

He said, "Why would I use them in the lesson? Last night, I collected all of these from neighbours to sell."

"You could have sold them to us *before* the lesson. Then everyone would have had one and she would have been really happy."

"Before she showed how it works, no one wanted one. No one would pay a pound when they don't know what it does. Now Mrs Spendlove explains, everyone wants one. Her lesson was good advertising."

"But you brought Blu-Tack and Alka-Seltzer as well as the canisters – how did you know?"

"Rockets were invented in Mongolia. Propulsion is in our blood."

A lad called Backy – he's in the police now – said, "They're my canisters. You can't make me pay for my own canisters."

Apparently, the night before, Chingis had gone and knocked on every door in his block of flats – including Backy's – and asked if they had any film canisters.

"I give you the canister free," said Chingis. "Blu-Tack is free also. Just one pound for the Alka-Seltzer."

Poor old Backy went for that. Honestly, they didn't know they'd been cut in half until they tried to walk away. Chingis got little Nergui to help him count all the cash. Thirty-four quid they made, and all day the school was full of popping sounds and quietly fizzing puddles.

There is only so much Good Guiding you can do in a primary school playground. Even though I really tried to spin it out, I'd pretty much pointed out every stone and weed by the end of ten playtimes. Mrs Harrison was the dinner lady – she had the power to give you a plaster if you cut yourself. The big red box held outdoor play equipment – you could take what you wanted but you had to put it back when you were finished (Mrs Harrison was watching). The numbers and squares painted on the floor were for playing hopscotch but no one ever did, because no one really

knew how. The quiet corner – a little ring of apple trees with the bench in the middle – had been made in memory of a boy who'd died just before we came to the school. Everyone said he was buried under the trees and there were bits of him in the apples – but it wasn't true; he was buried in a graveyard like everyone else.

Until Chingis came, I had mostly spent playtime with Mimi, walking up and down beside the railings, talking about the inevitable future success of our imaginary girl group, the Surfing Eskimos. Until I took on the Good Guide duties, I'd had no idea there was a small tribe of sad-looking Year Five lads who more or less lived in the clump of trees that had been planted to hide the bins. They spent their time playing on their DSes and avoiding Shocky and Duncan. I'd had no idea that Mrs Harrison spoke French because she came from the Congo. I hadn't known that you could find frogs in the big clump of nettles between the playground and the car park. And I hadn't known there were hula hoops in the outdoor play box.

Chingis took one out and asked me what it was. I put it over my head and tried to spin it round my waist but it just clattered straight onto the floor.

"Oh," he said, "it's a hula hoop. You do it like this."

He took it off me, dropped it over his head and, barely moving his hips, made it spin like a blender. He could carry on walking and talking at the same time. Nergui too.

Mrs Harrison laughed and said, "You don't often see boys doing that."

Chingis stood still. The hoop dropped to the floor. He looked around the playground. "This place is nearly nothing but girls. Where are the boys?"

"This is the red playground," I said, "it's for anyone. If you want to play football, you go on the blue playground. It's through there... Nearly all the boys play football."

Chingis led Nergui through the little gap between the dining hall and the Portakabin and I followed. The two of them stood there for the rest of break, watching the boys charging up and down the blue playground, yelling and pointing and chasing the ball.

Chingis said, "Does this have rules?"

"I think so," I said.

"You need to find them out. We need to play this."

"Right."

So the two of them came back to ours and made me explain the rules of football. I had to borrow a ball from next door and, in the end, I had to borrow the little boy

too. Jordan, he was called. He couldn't understand why they didn't know how to play.

I said, "They're from Mongolia."

"Even so, they must have footie. They have footie everywhere."

"Not in Mongolia."

"No," said Chingis. "Mongolia is just horses, horses, horses. If we want to play with a ball, we get on a horse first. If we want to throw something or shoot something, we get on a horse. If we want to hunt, we get on a horse. If we get married, we take the bride on a horse. Only exception is wrestling. Wrestling is on the ground."

Jordan had heard of countries that had floods and disease and war but he'd never heard of anywhere so bad that it had no football. He was nearly in tears. He taught them skills, rules and tricks, and after that they sat on the pavement and he taught them the entire history of Liverpool FC.

Chingis said, "In football, it is just as much talking as it is playing."

From then on, Chingis spent little playtime trying to get me to talk to him about the offside rule, the transfer window and the history of the Champions' League. He didn't play, though. He made Nergui play and took me

to watch him. He'd point to him running up and down, barging into people, and say, "On the ball, yes, he's a bit of a donkey, but off the ball, he's a real workhorse." Even when he was talking about football, he was still quite horsey in his thinking.

Any football word he used – foul, penalty, you've got to be kidding, yes! – he said with a strong Liverpool accent. I'd been hoping he would turn me into some kind of Mongolian princess but instead he was turning into a Scouser. "See our kid?" he said, pointing at the pitch. "Can you even tell which one he is from here?"

"He's the one with his hat pulled down over his eyes."

"That means nothing. Know the best way to hide a needle in a haystack?"

"I don't think there is a best way. Once the needle is in the haystack, it's really hard to find. I think that's the point, really."

"What if you've got a metal detector?"

"Do demons have metal detectors?"

"Don't talk about demons. Don't even mention them. OK? The point is: he looks just like any other kid now." And he did look just like any other kid. "The best way to hide a needle in a haystack is to disguise the needle as a piece of hay."

The truth was: the boys weren't just learning English; they were hiding themselves *inside* English, burying themselves in footie and insults, swearing and buzz words. They were *learning* themselves ordinary. And in

our school, ordinary boys did not hang out with girls. Soon they didn't need a Good Guide any more, and I found myself back at the railings with Mimi, planning our future fame and deciding what to wear on Own Clothes Day.

Own Clothes Day was when you were allowed to wear what you liked to school as long as you gave money to charity. I think there'd been a tidal wave or an earthquake. I say you were allowed to wear whatever you liked. In fact, if you were a boy you were allowed to wear an Everton football strip – and risk being skitted by Liverpool fans – or a Liverpool football strip – and risk being skitted by Everton fans – or something other than a football strip – and risk being beaten up by everyone. Girls were allowed to wear basically anything they liked as long as it was really, really short and involved a huge bag. For some reason, I decided to go in the boy next door's Everton kit. I probably thought it was my chance to remind Chingis that I was the one who'd taught him about footie.

When I got to school, he was waiting with Nergui at the gate. The two of them were standing completely still. They were wearing their mad coats again – the furry dressing-gown coats they'd worn on their first

day. And they were both wearing hats with fur inside. They looked mighty.

Chingis looked at me in my Everton kit. "Perfect."

I thought he was paying me a compliment. I said, "It's just a footie kit. It's not even an official one. It's a rip-off and it's not even a rip-off of this season's kit."

"Please come with us."

He made me wait outside the boys' toilets while they went inside. A few minutes later, he came out carrying Nergui's coat. "You wear this," he said. "Nergui will have your football kit."

In the girls' toilets, a million tiny hooks of static tried to cling on as I peeled myself out of the nylon Everton top. Then I stepped into Nergui's coat as if I was stepping into another country. The cuffs were frayed and worn – I imagined that was where the eagle used to perch. The corners of the pockets were packed with grit – probably sand from the Gobi Desert. I was half expecting to find the rest of the desert waiting for me when I opened the toilet door. It wasn't.

Chingis was waiting for me, though. And after Nergui had disappeared back into the toilets with the football kit, the two of us stood there in the corridor, letting people look at us. No one said anything bad. We looked too scary.

When Nergui came out, it was the first time I'd seen him without his hat. He had long hair.

I said, "Nergui! You've got long hair! You look like a girl!"

"He thinks if he looks like a girl, his demon won't recognize him."

Nergui said, "You look like a boy in there. Maybe my demon will take you."

It was the first time I'd heard him talk too. He sounded just like any other boy in our school.

I just said, "Maybe."

Obviously I knew they'd only asked me to swap clothes to confuse their demon. Did I care about being used as demon-bait? No, because by then I didn't believe in demons. Plus, wearing that fur coat made me one of a pair with Chingis, one of a pair of swaggering nomads with eagle-calming skills and strings of horses somewhere in the desert.

In the afternoon, Mrs Spendlove asked Chingis to tell the class a little bit about the clothes we were wearing. I stood up and explained that they had to be thick and warm because it could get so cold on the steppe, even in the desert, at night. Minus fifty. And even though they hadn't asked me, I told them about Chingis Khan – who Chingis was named after, just like lots of

Mongolian boys. Because I knew all about him, I said how when he was dying, he asked to be buried in a secret place with no monument so that the whole of his empire could be his gravestone. After his friends had laid his body in the ground, they stampeded a thousand horses over it to churn up the soil and disguise his grave. Then they all rode home and killed each other so that no one would ever tell the secret.

"What about you, Chingis? What can you tell us about your country?" said Mrs Spendlove. Thinking about it now, that may have been a pointed remark as I seemed to be doing all the talking.

He said, "Well, there's the desert. And then there are some oasis things in the desert, you know, with trees that look like giant flowers." I didn't know about them. "They're sort of magical. And we have mountains that are made of metal and they are shiny in the sun." I didn't know about them, either. "And if you're in trouble, you can make a pile of stones and maybe put some horse's skull on it, or a prayer flag, and walk around it three times clockwise, and that'll help. It's called an ovoo."

"How will that help?" someone asked.

"I'm not sure. If you see one that someone else has built, you should walk round that three times too. I'll show you a photo if you like."

And he did. He had photos of the desert. Of the magical oasis with the flower-like trees. Of the pile of stones.