

All Belongs to Me by Petra Hůlová

(Translated by Alex Zucker, taken from Transcript, www.transcript-review.org, March 2006, iss. 22).

2009 | Northwestern University Press

When the shoro hits, plastic sacks go whipping round and round the ger. Sometimes I sit outside and watch the sand swirl as the horizon turns golden-brown and through the whirl of yellow dust the sun is dim and trembly. My shoes turn gray under the buildup of dust, a dust that stings people's eyes and crunches under the horses' hoofs, setting the whole herd on edge and making it hard on the yelping nochoi whose job it is to separate the in-foal mares with young from the rest.

When the shoro hits and there's nothing to do, since I can't see a step ahead and I'd choke to death outside, or not be able to find my way back, I sit out in front of the entrance to our ger, on the right, and wonder what it used to look like here in the days before there were plastic sacks, when families like us didn't have even a decent knife and couldn't improve their lot by selling crackers and cigarettes, the way our father did whenever someone happened to stumble across us. Lately, it's been happening pretty often.

Supposedly it's because there's someone in Bulgan who grows good, cheap mandjin, carrots, and onions, so people go to shop there more than before and more of them pass our ger along the way. I don't believe it, though, because they sell vegetables in Davchan too, and only a couple of people a week pass through going that direction.

Maybe the man who sells vegetables in Davchan is an erlits, like his father, so nobody wants to buy from him – the Chinese are underhanded and no one around here trusts them.

Davdja, a girl who lives five miles south of us, once brought home a man named Liu Fua, and Batu, her father, turned him in for being here illegally, and for smuggling plastic shoes and waterproof shirts, which he sold in the capital. I guess it was true, or at least at the time everyone thought so – he did look funny and he almost didn't talk at all, but to take away little Gerla's daddy as soon as she was born wasn't right. From morning to night, Davdja did nothing but weep and threaten to leave home, but there was nowhere for her to go. Liu Fua went to the city to straighten things out, but after two weeks, when he hadn't returned, it was clear he'd been sent back home to China. Either that or he'd been taken in by relatives, which every erlits has in every country, somewhere, and they'd found him another woman

whose family wouldn't be such a problem. At any rate, he never returned. Mother said she understood Batu's decision, and that she'd never give me away to any Chinaman either, not even for a herd of well-fed camels and the fastest dappled horses.

I myself, though, with my funny eyes and sickly little build, look like one of them. There have been people who've teased me about it, too – like a few years back, at the somon school, when I was bragging about my family's felts, which the shopkeepers paid more for than any others in the aymag – and all the while they were grinning in the sickest way.

Insulting my Chalch purity like that! I wanted to do something to them, get back at them, but instead I felt only tears. Even so, I believed them more than my own mother. Nara, on the other hand, has always had very fair hair. Father was in the army at the time, just like he was away when Mother made me, so when it comes to these things she can't really be trusted.

When I was about five, a man came to our door who wasn't a Mongol. He had long, thick hair, a special del with narrow sleeves, and he stayed at our place overnight. In the morning, it looked like Mother was either going to belt him one, throw herself at him, or leave along with him. She was gesturing wildly and her eyes were flashing red. I remember I was sick at the time with a fever, and the flames in Mother's eyes seemed like the tongues of a rabid dog trying to kill me. Those eyes just kept looking at me, endlessly, while Mother sat at the side of my bed, feeding me sour sheep's yogurt to keep up my strength. That was after the man who wasn't a Mongol had left.

Even before, I'd had the feeling they didn't like me as much as Maggi, but that was when I got the sense that Mother could also be distant and mean, eyeing me with hatred while she cleaned up after me because, apart from the yogurt, I kept throwing up everything else. Grandma said that it was the end, but it wasn't.

That spring, when the strange man who wasn't a Mongol appeared, we had lots of little lambs, and then never again after that. Grandma said later that it was his fault, he'd put a curse on our sheep, and that if he'd taken me instead, it wouldn't have been nearly as great a loss, since I was only five then, which isn't even a Mongol yet, just a little baby goatling. Plus Mother and Father had three more still. Now there are only three of us, Maggi died, but that's still enough for our clan to flourish, even if some get stuck in a snowstorm, catch a disease, or get lost.

It's sad about Maggi. She was the most beautiful of us all, and Father always liked her the best. Even if Mother didn't give him a boy – I think he never totally forgave her for that – she did at least deliver the best-looking girl in the region. Tsaraitai ochin, they'd all say when they came to visit, while me and Nara just sat huddled on the left, the women's, side of the ger, reassuring ourselves that Maggi was prettier than us only because she was a lot older, when

the truth was that she was just three years older than me and four than Nara, and had been that beautiful ever since she was a little girl and we knew it.

Little Oyuna, seeing me and Nara whispering to each other, started pounding my thighs with her fists and shoving her way in between us to make sure that she didn't miss anything. To make sure we'd pay attention to her. She's seven years younger than Nara and eight years younger than me, so she got on our nerves and always had to fight hard to get anything from us. She ruined all of our games, and we had to drag her along with us everywhere we went because Mother had work, Father was with the herd, and Maggi knew how to take care of herself. She would take a washbowl and go and hide out behind the ger, just messing around for hours with the innards of the sheep that Father had killed that day, though anyone else would've been done with it right away. Either that or she'd make some excuse about how she had to go gather some argal because Mother might be lighting the stove that night to make boodz, and Oyuna would keep her from doing her work. So, in the end, me and Nara always had to drag her along with us.

Oyuna was born during the most awful winter I remember. The wind outside was so freezing cold that every time you blinked you had to peel your eyelids back open again, over and over, and sometimes, when I was on my way home in the evening from fetching the herd and I was tired, I would wait longer and longer each time before I peeled them apart, and I'd get an urge to just sit down on the snow and fall asleep. My nostrils would stick together too, tugging painfully on the hairs. That happens every winter of ours, only that time, when Oyuna was born, it was a lot worse.

Animals' flanks and people's cheeks grew pinched, making even the young look old, and adults didn't let little children go outside at all. They either tied them to the legs of a bed or put them in a leather crib over the stove, so they didn't have to worry about them when they went outside to dig the sheep out of the snow.

So much snow fell the winter Oyuna was born that Grandma decided to die – she didn't think she could withstand such a bombardment, so she slept her way through all three of the worst months, wrapped in blankets next to the stove, while Dad brewed strong, hot tea with milk for the goats' and sheep's young, to make sure they survived. The large animals he wrapped in old skins, and he yelled at the horses when he saw that some of them didn't want to live anymore. When the good horses died, he banged their behinds and legs with a tashur to make them stand up so he could shoot them, and Nara and I quickly came running to watch as their dying eyes turned cloudy and blank and their flanks twitched as if they were driving off flies. Then I took off my gloves and reached down to touch the horse's belly, between its rear legs, where it was the warmest, to warm myself.

Nara meanwhile went running home, because Grandma was screaming from bed that Mother was giving birth.

Oyuna was an unbelievable child and Mother struggled with her for weeks. She wasn't so young anymore, and wasn't all that happy when she found out there was going to be another one of us. Father was pleased, because he was sure that this time, at last, Mother was going to give him a boy. He boasted about it on every visit we paid the summer before, laughing at Oyunbata, who lives not far from Batu and Davdja, because that spring he had just had his sixth daughter and meanwhile Mother's belly was growing with what Father imagined was going to be the future Chinggis Khan of our clan.

Aunt Chiroko, who, Burchan knows why, has a Japanese name and some of our family went to her because she was a shaman, just nodded her head and Father believed it would come out as he hoped. But when Oyuna was born, he declared that Chiroko had suspected it from the start, otherwise she wouldn't have nodded her head so hard, and he had thought so too, as soon as he saw how pointy Mother's belly was and how slowly it was growing.

When Mother had a big belly, me and Nara were happy. She got slower and clumsier every day, and noticed us less and less. Father was always off in the mountains with the herd, so she had to manage everything at home by herself, because ever since the time Grandma had forgotten to salt the meat for khoorshoor, Mother had ceased to count on her around the house.

Grandma would get angry sometimes when Mother kept her from helping. She would curse Mother out in her dialect, the tongue of a western nation, so me and Nara couldn't understand, but Mother got the message even without any words. About all I could make out was that it had something to do with that man who had never been a Mongol, the one Mother had loved.

When Mother's time came, the cold was so awful that they couldn't even send me and Nara and Maggi outside. I'll never forget Oyuna's first sobs and Mother's heavy sighs of relief when it was over. We weren't allowed to watch, so my only memories of that night are through my ears. The long darkness and the yells, and then, as the sun was coming up, Mother and the baby asleep, bundled together in a hard, tight knot and covered with almost every sheepskin we owned at the time, because Father was worried. Even though it was a girl, he kept the heat going all night and day and the next night again, until the air was so hot and heavy and full of smoke that me and Nara started to feel dizzy. We weren't allowed to go outside, except to go to the toilet, because Father was afraid the draft would make the baby catch cold, so me and Nara lay down in bed together and played our games.

We had a little bag full of sheep anklebones that we carried around with us everywhere. Mine were red and Nara's were painted yellow so we wouldn't get them confused. When we were in a good mood, we would pour them out on the floor and play. When Oyuna was born, I got the camel on all my bones three times in a row. Nara got furious and with one grand sweep of her hand sent the bones flying to all corners of the ger. At that blow, the baby, who had just finished feeding and was almost asleep, woke up and launched into a fit of inconsolable bawling. Mother started shaking him up and down to get him to calm down and Father, yelling, draft or no draft, shoved Nara out of the ger into the freezing cold with the dogs.

When winter was as cold as it was in the Year of the Rabbit, when Oyuna came into the world, the dogs would do crazy things. They were hungry all the time and they would scratch at the door all night, even though they knew very well that the warmth was only for us, for Mongols.

Grandma spent the entire winter of Oyuna lying down. Even in her double-thick winter del she shivered with cold, grumbling that Maggi wasn't heating enough, that me and Nara were good for nothing, and that Father came home too late at night. She would carry on for days at a time like that, back and forth, sleeping and weeping, and then one morning, when I was pretending to still be asleep, I heard Mother telling Father that Grandma wasn't going to live to celebrate the New Year and who was going to help her prepare the dough for the boodz then? Every family has to make at least five thousand of them to ensure that everyone who visits walks away with a belly as hard as an animal in July who just stands around for days on end, head down, grazing incessantly.

Father just said Grandma was going to make it, took his saddle from the coatrack, and went along his way. He didn't get mad at Mother at all, and my belief that she was sometimes nasty and cruel was reconfirmed, hearing her talk about Grandma that way. Grandma was Father's mother, not Mother's: Maybe that was the reason why she and Mother argued so much and why Mother, in Grandma's view, hardly ever did anything right. But there were other things involved, too. Maybe Grandma had seen what she wasn't supposed to have seen – she knew of the secrets in my mother's heart.