

## A Heartfelt Gift (from B. Ganchimeg's *The House of Joy*)

*The House of Joy* by B. Ganchimeg is the story of a young girl named Az Jargal—meaning Joy or Happiness in Mongolian—who moves with her family from an apartment in the city of Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, to the ger district, where individual tent homes (called gers in Mongolian or yurts in English and other languages) offer privacy on individual plots of land, but lack running water and indoor plumbing.

The chapter "A Heartfelt Gift" describes one event in the ger district school that Az Jargal has recently switched to from her school in the central city.

### A Heartfelt Gift

The New Year was approaching. Our classmates began to plan the organization of the "Monita"<sup>1</sup>. One day, the class teacher introduced the rules of "Monita". The children buzzed around the glass jar from which the names of children to receive gifts were drawn. In my old class, "Monita" continued for 5 days. During the first four days, gifts are given according to the following rules: first day, round things; second, gifts costing more than ten thousand<sup>2</sup>; then sparkling things, and the like. The biggest gift is given on the last day. But in our new class, there is only one rule to be followed. On the day of Monita, you will give a gift to the child whose name you have drawn. That's it. I drew the name of a boy named Toshloy, who I had never spoken to. That boy always sits at the back table and is not good at studies. When boys start to fight, he is always in the middle. Whenever bad things happen, he will be involved. You wouldn't give a book to this naughty boy, would you? If you give him a toy, will he break it right away? What would be a decent idea for a gift? Anyway, I decided to take twenty thousand togrog from my mother and give him something worth the money. After school, Enkhchimeg and I were called by a group of girls from our class.

Sarnai said, "Girls, what are you going to give your Monita partner? For my mother giving two thousand togrog sure is a lot. Cookies and sweets are awkward to give. I have one idea."

We had a girls' meeting and came up with a great gift idea. What kind of gift to get was the thing we needed rack our brains about. For the boys, instead we would make a Gift Certificate and decided on this important work. Any child would love tasty food and

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<sup>1</sup>"Monita" is the Mongolian term for what English-speakers know as "Secret Santa", where gifts are given anonymously. Boys give gifts to girls, and girls give gifts to boys.

<sup>2</sup>Mongolian currency is the Togrog, ₮10,000 is about \$4

sweets, but we decided to give an even more heartfelt gift.

The day of "Monita" giving has come. I'm not at all excited about from whom or what kind of gift I would get. But I feel excited to see how the boys would receive the same kinds of gifts the girls prepared. "Give your gift to your Monita," the head of the class said loudly, and here and there the sound of zippers of plastic bags and backpacks mingled, and the boys and girls began to move and bustle. Everyone is smiling and looks satisfied. Who is not happy to receive a gift! Suddenly Tulgaa runs in front of the chalkboard, holding up one of the certificates I had written, shouting, "Hey! Three times free from duty voucher." Sukhbold jumped up, "Mine is completely crazy. Imagine the right to copy homework three times!" He giggled as he said it, and the class was quietly glad. One after another, the boys' voices rang out. "Getting math tutoring three times", "The right to get a homemade meal after school twice", "Three free entries to the hot showers<sup>3</sup>"... The girls were able to give the others gifts created from their own things. Our Toshloy shouted no less loudly than the others, "Hoo! The right to three free haircuts," and the class suddenly fell silent<sup>4</sup>. Then they crowded around Toshloy to check whether it was true. "Wow, all three times!" someone called out without envy. "Who was your Monita?" one of them asked, and Toshloy pointed in my direction and everyone looked at me. I smiled bashfully at the boys and said, "My mother is a hairdresser!".

The girls will be equally happy to receive small earrings, headbands, notebooks, and crayons. How beautiful "Monita" is when no one is complaining! The boys, who received the "Heartfelt Gift" prepared by the girls, came out cheerful and content. They were undoubtedly thinking about what kind of heartfelt gift they would prepare for us in the next Monita.

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<sup>3</sup>In the ger districts, running water is available only in central shared facilities that charge for access.

<sup>4</sup>Relative to the other gifts, a haircut would be the most expensive in Mongolia.