



NO IN-BETWEEN Sarah Salway

Monica Galgut has a funny name but she speaks nicely. I know what my mother means when she wishes I would say my words like Monica does.

I try but then I get excited and it all rushes out, all the words I'm not allowed to say, the missed h's I *am* supposed to say, the inks instead of the ings.

I work hard at it because maybe, if I can learn to speak like Monica, my mother will listen to what I say rather than how I say it.

It's hot the day Monica comes to me before school starts and tells me, so nicely, that she has a secret and if I'm still her friend by the end of the day she will share it with me.

I'm still thinking about what Monica's secret might be when a crying nun rushes into the classroom and tells us to go to the hall

where we spend the next two hours on our knees praying for Bobby Kennedy to get better. Nuns walk up and down the aisle beside us to make sure we don't shuffle or itch, because if we stop talking to God for even one minute, it could be our fault Bobby dies. Once they opened the doors to let the air in, but we got so distracted by the noises we heard outside they shut them again. Sometimes though they talk to us about how beautiful and brave Jackie was when it happened the first time and how sad it is for Rose to lose her fine boys, but mostly we're just quiet. I'm pleased they shut the doors. I was scared the man with the gun was going to come storming in and kill me too.

Before Monica came to the school, I would run round the playground very fast, continuously, all playtime so no-one would realise I didn't have a friend to play with. Now I can take my time more and sometimes I'm invited to join the games anyway.

The day after we fail to save Bobby Kennedy, I watch Monica dancing in the playground as she says she might still tell me the secret. On the other hand, Alexandra Beaumont is a better skipper than me and can be guaranteed not to let her down. Unlike me.

Might. Might not. Monica skips up and down the stone steps as she chants this. She shouldn't do this because sweat is beading on her lip. Pigs sweat, gentleman perspire but ladies merely glow. Monica's not glowing. She's wet, but then so am I, under my arms, and I don't want to play in case anyone sees and points it out. Instead I sit on the bottom step and tie my shoelace again and again until I've got the bow just right.

My mother wears shiny white shoes with big buckles that I see her

admiring sometimes when she thinks no-one's looking. My father laughs at her when she sticks a newspaper photograph of Rose Kennedy next to one of Jackie up on the kitchen wall. Jackie's wearing big sunglasses like my mother has started to do, even when it's not sunny. She says it's to hide her lines, but I've looked closely and she doesn't have any. My father says she's as good a mother as Rose any day but my mother tells him not to blaspheme. Then she tells both of us that we don't appreciate her and starts crying again.

The Kennedy pictures are covering a painting I did years ago before I learnt that the sky and the grass were not two thin lines at the top and the bottom of a piece of paper, but met somewhere in the middle. In art, a visiting nun had taken me to the window and made me point out where the sky merged into the grass of the playground opposite. We'd looked at my painting then, the two of us, and the nun had put her finger on all the white space in the middle of my piece of paper. She asked me why I'd drawn all that nothingness. 'There is no in-between,' she'd said. She spoke so beautifully, it made me sad. There is no in-between.

I remember this as Monica comes to sit down next to me on the step. I share my rubber bands with her. Our latest craze is French skipping and we plait the bands together to form the cradle, taking care to make pleasing patterns with the colours.

'You could tell me your secret now,' I say to Monica. We are so happy there I think we must be like the sky and grass, melting into one another in the heat. We're making a big yellow sun together. But then Monica pinches the skin on my thigh very hard so little white moons are left from where her nails dig in.

‘Torture time,’ she says and I run away from her as she chases me, her fingers like claws. I’m screaming with laughter although there’s nothing I would rather have done than stayed sitting on that stone step with Monica in the sun.

Monica’s father has a loud voice that gets higher and sharper when he teases. When I can’t avoid talking to him he snaps his fingers and says ‘quicker, quicker’ so my words won’t come out properly. Monica says he likes it when you are rude to him. She tells him to shut up when he calls her Harmonica and he laughs. But when he calls me mouse, I’m too shy to say anything even when he makes believe I’m not there, pretending to sit on top of me and eating the food off my plate.

He’s the reason I don’t like going to Monica’s house, but I still want to hear the secret and Monica says she’ll only tell me in her bedroom so I ring my mother and tell her I’m staying for tea. She tells me to have fun in such a little voice that I want to be sick with how much I miss her, but then Monica’s mother brings out a chocolate cake and tells me to come and sit down next to Monica. I count the plates on the table. Four. I can feel the tears well up.

When I hear noises at the door, I put my hand over my cake automatically. I am determined that this time I will be rude to Mr Galgut and say ‘no, this is my cake’ when he pretends to steal it but then Eddy Fryer from down the road comes in and takes the fourth place.

Under the table, Monica squeezes my leg three times in the special code we have devised and as we both duck down to fetch our dropped napkins, she whispers that Eddy Fryer is the secret. I have to

say I'm disappointed. Eddy Fryer comes to my house too, and he and my mother have long grown up conversations that bore me rotten. He never speaks to me. He says he doesn't like children which makes my mother laugh and tell him he's dreadful but in the same way she tells me to stop eating chocolate at Christmas so I know she doesn't mean it.

Eddy Fryer has a funny soft mouth. His bottom lip seems to fall slightly as he talks as if he hasn't got the strength to hold it up. Not like my father, who manages to talk without moving his lips or his teeth. It's as if his voice is so important it's coming direct from his throat. Eddy Fryer has odd hair too. It's long and curly and he plays with it all the time, twisting it between his fingers like a girl.

Eddy doesn't work like other men. He's always around in the afternoons. You see him popping into people's houses, drifting down the street as if he doesn't know where he's going, but he's always going somewhere. He looked after his mother when she was ill, almost as if he was a nurse. I overheard my mother tell my father that Eddy had said this taught him that life was too short not to play. She laughed again then, but my father didn't. I think this is why my father doesn't tell us we should respect Eddy Fryer like he does other adults, who never have time to play. My father says Eddy Fryer is a cross we have to bear, which makes my mother laugh even more, but behind her hand where I think she must believe my father can't see or hear. I don't think he'd mind. My mother doesn't seem to laugh much with him these days.

I raise my eyebrows at Monica when we're right way up and she glares back. Neither of us say anything all tea, and Eddy talks through the cake in his mouth about dreams and dresses and fairy stories

while Mrs Galgut sits and smokes her cigarettes, laughing softly in the same way my mother does with Eddy.

‘The best thing about Cruella de Ville is that she wears such great furs,’ says Eddy, and Monica pinches me before I can stick up for the dalmations. The yelp I give is rather like a puppy Monica tells me afterwards.

Monica’s mother and Eddy both look at us as if they’ve suddenly noticed we’re there too. ‘Off you go, girls,’ Mrs Galgut says. Eddy looks at me as blankly as he does at home but as we leave, he puts his hand out to touch Monica’s head.

‘Great hair,’ he says. ‘Just like Jackie’s.’

I expect Monica to giggle or duck, like I would have done, but she stands there. It’s as if she’s frozen. As if the way Eddy’s stroking her hair has put her to sleep. His touch is as soft as his voice, hardly stirring a hair on her head.

‘Go,’ says Mrs Galgut loudly as if we’ve done something wrong, and her voice seems to jolt Monica awake. ‘Go outside and play in the garden. It’s too hot to have you both here, taking up all the air.’

We go but we creep upstairs instead.

Monica’s bedroom is pink. A year ago I would have died for Monica’s colour scheme, but now I’ve learnt enough to nod along with Monica as she says how much she hates her duvet cover, her carpet, her curtains, her walls. Even her lampshade. God, look at that pink lampshade.

I keep thinking about Eddy. How pink his fingers looked against Monica’s dark hair, the contrast between the light and the dark. How quickly Mrs Galgut had changed from laughing to shouting. How it

was only Eddy who kept on talking, dreamily and gently, about nothing as we went, bridging the gap between rough and smooth.

‘The secret,’ I remind Monica, lying back on her soft bed. There’s a slight breeze through the open window, stirring her pink net curtains. I take out a pink teddy bear from behind my shoulders. Monica is sitting brushing her hair – just like Jackie’s – in the mirror at the dressing table. She’s looking at herself, not me. It’s as if she’s seeing herself for the first time. Her cheeks are red, but so are mine. It’s the heat. I wave at her reflection to make her notice me and she laughs, but I can tell it’s forced. She’s thinking about something else, so I lie back, looking at her through a little hole I make with my fingers.

It’s like watching her through the end of a long telescope. She’s not just a distance away from me. She’s in another room. So far away.

Monica tells me secrets about Eddy you would not believe. She’s gone mad, I know. He must have put a magic spell on her just now when he touched her. That’s why she’s making up these things. I can’t believe she dares to bring her mother in too. I want to run downstairs and prove it’s not true. I want to see Eddy and Monica’s mother still sitting at the table talking about cake recipes and different skirt lengths for the over-thirties. I want to show the scene to Monica to stop her saying these things.

The room is so hot it’s unbearable. It is filling up with this one giant mouth, Monica’s mouth, as she spills the poison out, and I’m being swallowed down a wet, pink tunnel of a throat. Monica’s mother is right. There’s not enough air to go around. Monica goes on and on, so I squeeze my fingers tight, snuffing out her image. It’s just her voice that drills into me now, her words slapping at me so my face turns

from side to side on the pink pillow. I wish my mother was here so she could hear Monica saying all these things. Two becoming one, parts fitting together, no in-between.

I think of the man who shot Bobby and the President and how we prayed for him too, but he turns into Eddy Fryer saying ‘great gun’, so I think of the nun at school who taught me about painting, and remember how, for months afterwards, I spoilt all my pictures by painting a giant yellow sun in the blue sky over the figures I’d already drawn on that green strip of grass. Instead of absorbing and pushing back the sky like in real life, the sun had blotted out all my people — my mother, me, and way in the distance behind a tree, a figure I always thought was my father but with long and curly hair.

I will myself to concentrate so hard on the way Monica’s talking instead of what she’s saying. I practice saying the words, louder and louder, faster and faster until they spill over each other and become one. I wash them over with a giant yellow sun in my mind. My mother, your mother, Eddy...

Until I finally blot Monica out.

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