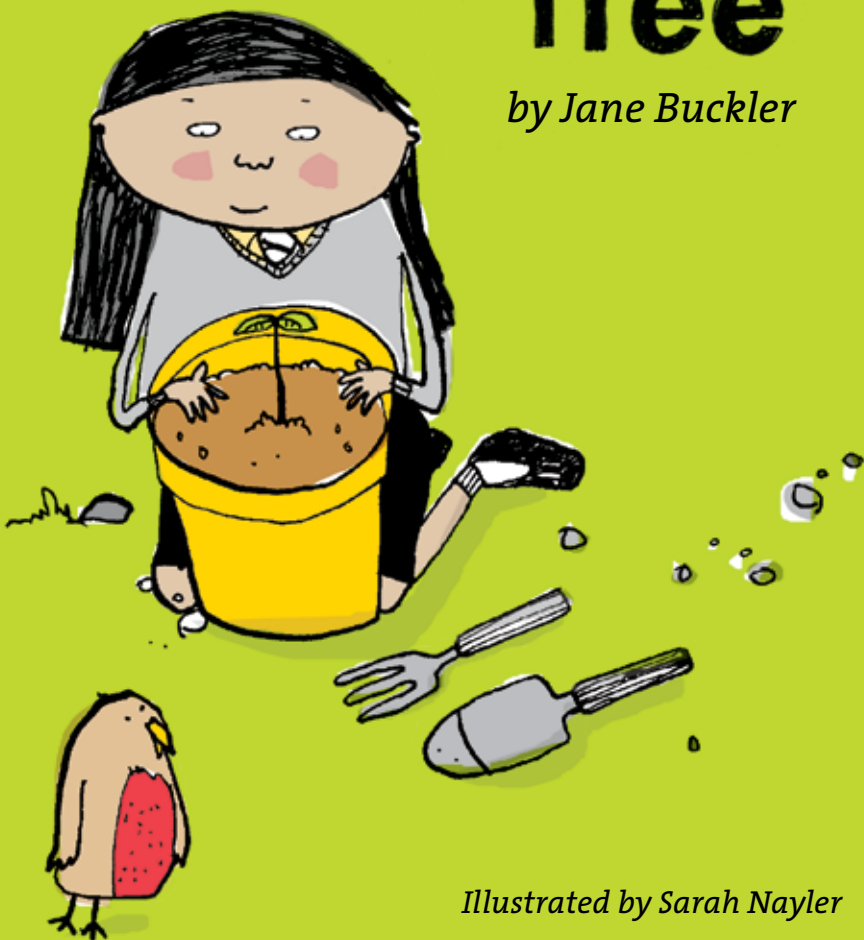


# The Mango Tree

*by Jane Buckler*



*Illustrated by Sarah Nayler*

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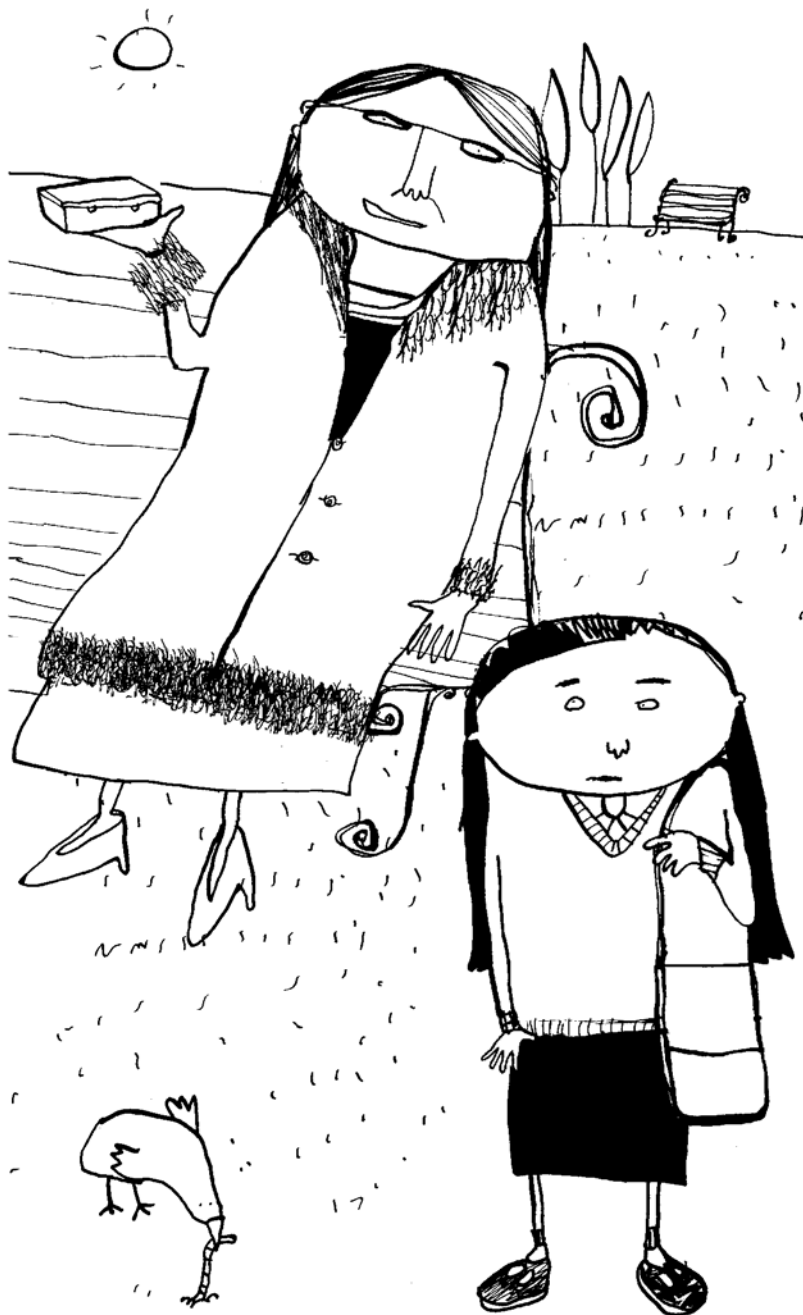


*Illustrated by Sarah Nayler*



*Thanks to the staff and students from Grafton Primary School,  
Hermitage Primary School, Gallions Primary School,  
Lauriston Primary School and Jubilee Primary School  
for their valuable contributions.*





## THE MANGO TREE



It's only five minutes to school and Grandma and me don't say much.

'You should be able to walk yourself to school by now' says Dad. 'What are you going to do next year, when you have to take the bus, on your own, to the big school?'

I don't really want to go on my own, on the bus, to the big school. This is what I'm thinking about when we reach the gate of the school I'm at now.

Grandma has to stop, and sits down on a bench to catch her breath. She can see I'm worrying and she

calls me over, placing my lunchbox on her knee and opening it up. She's pointing to a plastic box inside. 'Have a look at this' she says, in a big whisper.

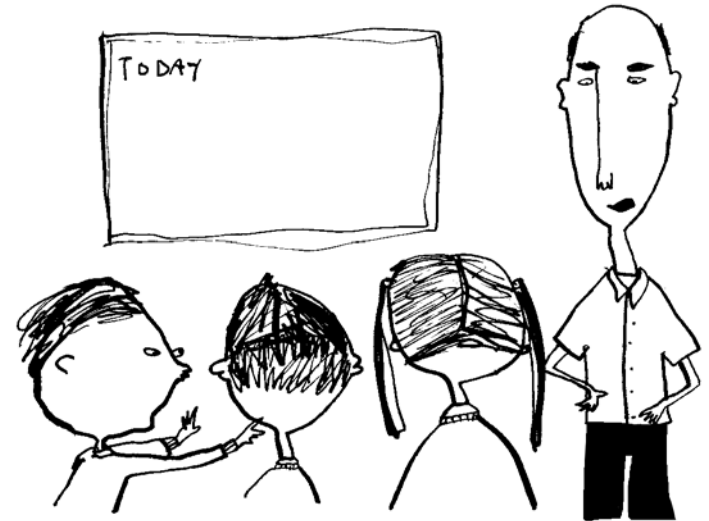
I prise open the lid, and the sweet smell hits me straight away. Bright orange slices stare out, tempting and delicious.

'Mango' she whispers, 'perfect mango. I got them at the market, two for one pound.'

'Thanks' I say, replacing the lid.

'It's life saving, girl, life saving.' She squeezes me hard. 'Have a good day.'

As I walk away I can see she is still there, watching me. Her face is like a fat sun watching the earth and warming it with her light.



'I'm waiting' says Mr Taylor. Mr Taylor is our teacher. There aren't any other men in our school. When he came into our classroom on his first day we thought he was the plumber. Not that he looks like a plumber. He's tall and thin and wears really clean stripy short-sleeved shirts.

'I'm waiting' he says again, 'until everyone is quiet.'

This takes a long time in our class.  
 'That has taken a whole two minutes.  
 That's two minutes of my life that  
 I won't get back.'

When there is silence, Mr Taylor holds his hands out, like a prophet.  
 'I've got some good news for you' he says. 'The Student Council...' Before he's even started Tiger yawns loudly.

'We got it? Yes!' Yasmin jumps up.

'Sit down, please, Yasmin.' Yasmin sits down. Yasmin is perfect.

'The Student Council...' Tiger yawns loudly again. 'One more time and you're out!' growls Mr Taylor '...have been awarded some money to change their school for the better.'

'Yes!' says Yasmin again, like she's just scored a goal.

'Urgh' says Ryan, screwing up his nose like he's smelt something bad.

Bella grabs Yasmin's arm. 'We did it!' she says, grinning. Bella is almost as perfect as Yasmin.

Mr Taylor picks up a typed letter and starts to read 'Your plan to improve an outside area in your school... the development of an external play area... and we are pleased to announce that you have been awarded a grant of one thousand pounds.'

'A thousand pounds!' Everybody's looking really excited now.

'That's a lot of sweets' says Tiger.

'One' says Mr Taylor, flatly,

'you must use the grant only for the purpose for which we awarded it.'



‘Boring’ says Ryan.

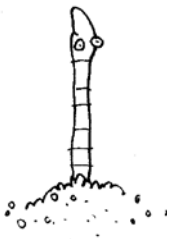
‘Not really’ says Mr Taylor. He puts the paper down and looks up at us.

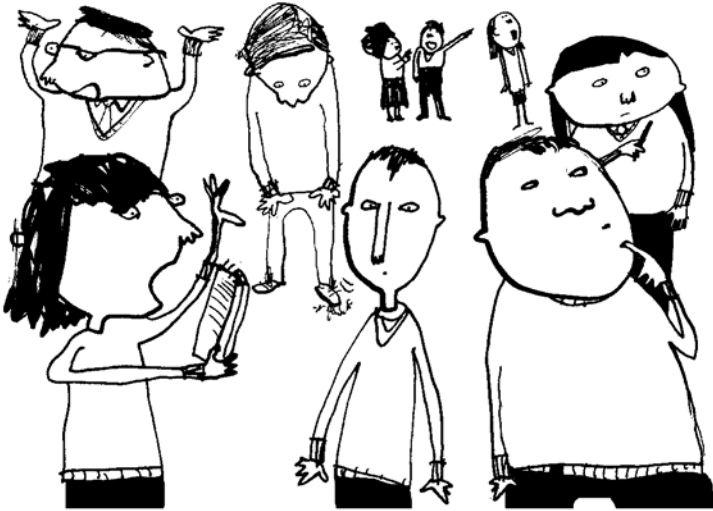
‘The difference is that you will be running this project yourselves, you will be making all the decisions.’ He raises his eyes to the ceiling and grins a big grin as if to say ‘not as easy as it looks’ the way that adults do to children when they want to make them feel even smaller than they really are. ‘Who would like to be involved in this adventure?’

Lots of children put their hands up. Mr Taylor starts to walk to the back of the room. He’s humming a tune. ‘If I didn’t take a walk to the end of the classroom every now and then I wouldn’t know that you lot were

down here.’ There’s a big scraping of chairs as everyone else turns round to see what’s going on. Everybody’s stretching their arms up into the air, hanging there like monkeys off trees. One girl isn’t. One girl is sitting tight, trying to avoid his eyes. There are red splashes on her cheeks and the back of her neck is starting to prickle.

‘Don’t you think this might be fun?’ says Mr Taylor. He’s looking straight at her, but she doesn’t look up. The girl is me. ‘Nadine?’ says Mr Taylor ‘What about you?’





There are nine of us doing this project. We're standing outside and we've got ten minutes to write down what we think of the ground before break. Bella's got the paper and pen and she starts us off.

'Rough.' she says, 'I've put rough.'

'It smells' says Ryan.

'No, it doesn't' says Yasmin.

'Don't be stupid.'

Ryan pushes Yasmin, for a joke, and she falls into the prickly bush growing against the wall.

'Ow!' she screams, 'Get off, you idiot.'

'Prickly bush' writes Bella.

'There's nothing to do' says Ryan.

'Except push people around!' cries Yasmin.

'Brown and empty?' says Marco.

'That's good, Marco' says Bella, being the teacher.

Ryan makes a serious face now, like an actor in a show we saw at the Unicorn Theatre. Then he laughs. 'Let's get a really big slide' he says, 'like a high slide or a mega trampoline. That'd be way cool.'

'We've got a playground already' says Bella.



‘What about a garden?’ says Marco.

‘A secret garden!’ Yasmin is better suddenly and claims the whole idea for herself.

‘It’s not an old peoples home’ says Ryan.

‘It wouldn’t be like that. We’d make it ourselves and we could look after it ourselves – we could have lavender and roses and everything’ says Yasmin.

‘Yeah, like an old people’s home’ says Ryan.

‘My dad has an allotment. It’s great’ says Yasmin.

‘My dad does nothing’ says Ryan.

‘Five minutes left’ says Bella.

Everybody goes quiet again. I start thinking about my dad. He’d like a

thousand pounds. I imagine going home and saying to him ‘I won this money. It was a prize. It was a prize from school for reading and writing.’

‘Wake up, Nadine’ says Marco.

‘Tiger and Nadine, they never say nothing’ says Ryan.

‘Anything.’ says Yasmin.

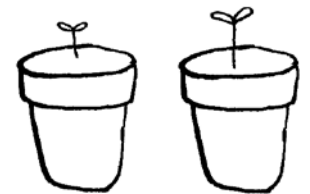
‘Yeah right’ says Ryan, annoyed.

‘Hey Nothings! Why don’t you say something?’

‘At least they don’t push people around’ says Yasmin.

I turn towards the wall so no one can see my face.

‘One thing’ says Bella, ‘we’ve got to pull out that prickly bush. It hurts people.’



I want to look at Tiger, but he is standing away from the group. His eyes are wide and round like two alien space ships orbiting the earth. The spaceships take a look at us, but decide not to land.



At home I tell Dad about the project. 'What are you making a garden for?' he says. 'You're meant to be reading and writing, aren't you?'

I look out of the window. A bird lands on the low roof of a building. It looks around for a moment, and then it takes off again.

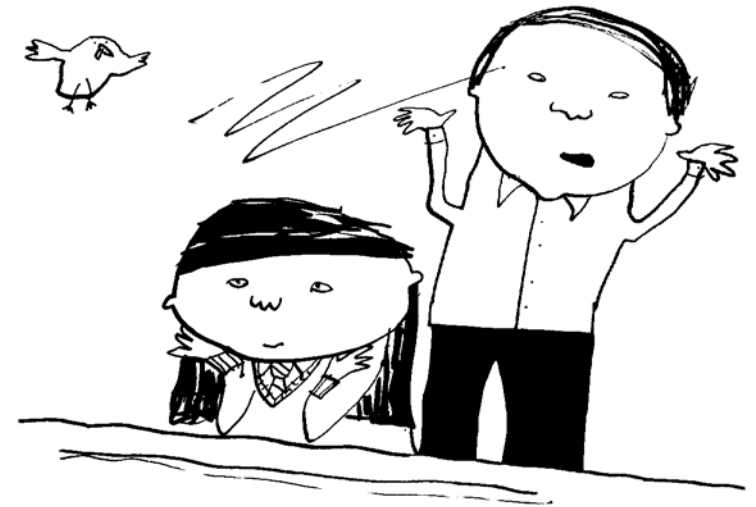
My father can't read or write

English. This is something that he never talks about and none of us are meant to say anything about it.

'We're going to get a gardener.' He stares at me. 'We're doing the interviews for the gardener ourselves.'

'Gardener?' he says, shaking his head from side to side. 'Expensive.'

I don't actually think he knows



anything about how much gardeners are. I do. We've researched the whole thing.

'We've got the money for it' I say, but then I wish I hadn't.

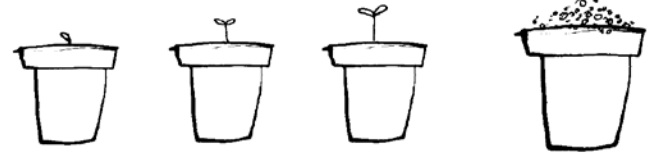
'How much money have you got?'

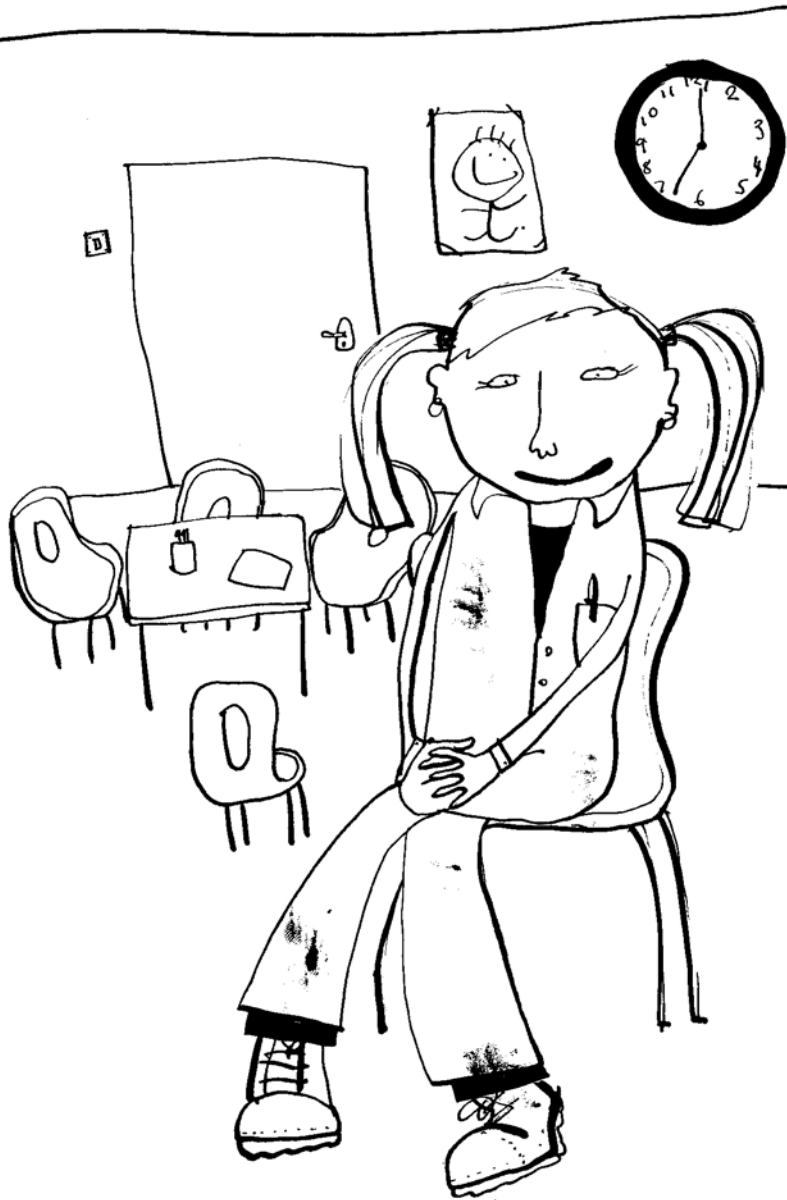
'One thousand pounds.'

I want to say about how the garden is for the whole school and about how we are going to grow flowers and vegetables for the children to eat but Dad isn't looking at me anymore. His eyes screw up in the sunlight as it breaks in through the glass, like a robber.

I go to my room. I share this room with my grandma but she's out. I've got one piece of mango left. I put it in my mouth and lie down.

I can hear Dad calling me. 'Nadine,' he says through the wall, 'I want you to work. I don't want you to do this garden project.'





‘My name is Viola. I’m a gardener. Well, you know that.’

‘Hello’ we say.

The first gardener we ask to meet us can’t come when we want them to come. Viola is number two.

‘You’ve been looking at some of my work at the local arts and gardens exhibition?’ She says it like it’s a question but she knows we have.

We are interviewing Viola. This is strange because normally adults interview adults. You can tell she thinks this is strange too and she shifts about on her chair.

Her hair is tied back away from her face a bit like ours. She’s small, maybe in her twenties. She’s wearing a big blue tunic over a pair of old jeans and

on her feet she's got two big black boots, like a man.

'I think gardens are about stories' she says, quietly.

'What sort of stories?' asks Marco. Marco likes stories, sci-fi and stuff.

'Stories about the past and the future.'

'Future?' says Marco. It is kind of mysterious, and we like it.

'Beginnings and endings' Viola says.

'Do you mean the seeds growing and then the flowers dying?' says Yasmin, being perfect again.

'No, not really' Viola replies.

No one ever says 'no' to Yasmin. We give Viola the job.



It is our first session and we are coming up with ideas for the garden. Viola hands out lots of paper and pens.

'Can it be anything?' asks Bella.

'Anything' says Viola.

We draw oceans, forests, dinosaurs and planets. I shade my design in carefully, the reds, the oranges, the greens and now the yellow.

'Still life?' says Yasmin.

'She normally is' adds Ryan.

I pretend to ignore him.

'Alien?' says Tiger

'Planet? Early life form?' says Marco.

'It's a stone' says Yasmin.

'No it's not' I say firmly. 'It's a mango.'

'It's really nice Nadine' says Bella.



'Do you like mango?'

'My grandma used to live in a house with a big garden' I say.

'What did she have in her garden?' asks Viola

'Bananas, bamboo, sugar cane. She said you could reach out and pick the red fruit from the mango tree.' I go over to my lunchbox, open it and show everybody.

'Urgh!' says Ryan, like he was spitting out something horrible. 'Yuk! You eat that?'

'Of course' I reply, standing my ground.

'It's more than food' says Viola, suddenly, 'It's one of the most sacred trees in India; they call it the 'King of Fruits' and believe it brings good luck.



Why don't you put grandma in the picture too?'

As I draw, I am imagining my grandma a long time ago. I've seen black and white pictures of her where her long dark hair is pulled back into a twist with a braid made from an old curtain.

'What are you planning to do with your Mango Tree Nadine?' asks Yasmin.

'Grow it' I say.

'In our school garden?' says Yasmin, and I know she's going to make me feel stupid. 'You can't,' says Miss Perfect-Know-It-All. 'You can't grow mangos in England, it's too cold.'

I ask to go to the toilet. I'm thinking that maybe Dad's right; I shouldn't be

doing this project after all.

Back in the classroom we turn our plans into 3D models. We stick on words like 'friendship corner', 'maze', 'star-catcher', 'hideout', 'jungle slide' and 'mango tree'. Later, we go down and set out our work on tables by the office. All the children will be allowed to vote for the one they think is the best. Yasmin is slicing a deep hole in the top of a box for the voting papers. I want her to fall into the hole and not be able to climb out. She can take Ryan with her as well.



At the end of school, there is a message from Dad telling me to walk

home on my own. I get back and turn the key and push open the door to the flat. I can hear him talking on the telephone. I go to the fridge for some milk and he comes in.

'Your grandma,' he coughs, 'She's had to go into hospital.'

Seeing my face, he doesn't stop there, as he would normally have done but goes on, 'Just something small that is wrong.'



The 'wrong' word waits when all the others have gone. It is like the rope around the hangman's neck on the end of term blackboard game when you are trying to save yourself by guessing the final letter but you lose.

The hospital is creamy white and smells funny. When we get to her bed Grandma turns to look at me. There are two tubes going up her nose.

'Oxygen' says Dad.

Her mouth is dry but she opens it and says 'Hello, my baby.'

I smile but I feel sad.

'Look! I've got a room all to myself!' She squeezes my hand. 'I'd rather be with you, of course.'

As I start to tell her about the

garden design I've made I see a tear come into the corner of her eye and fall out, just like a drop of rain. She whispers 'You grow a mango for me, you grow a nice fat mango for me.'



The voting box is grinning its wicked wide cut smile. It says 'Vote for me, or else I'll get you!' At least, that's what Ryan says it says.

I want it to say 'Vote for me and you'll save someone's life.' Obviously, I don't. I don't tell anyone about what happens at home. My mother and sisters live in another house but I don't talk to people about it.

Children start queuing up to vote



for the garden. Which one will they like? Yasmin's Crystal Palace? Tiger's Planet Party? Marco's Dalek Disco?

I want my garden. I need my garden. My grandma needs my garden. Do the other children even like mangos?

We go back to the classroom. Mr Taylor returns with the trays and I watch him put the voting box into a high cupboard by the door.

At the end of the day I stay behind until everyone has gone. I know there'll be nobody waiting outside for me today.

Mr Taylor has got football practice. I crawl inside the art cupboard and crouch down.

When it's quiet, I crawl out.

My heart is pounding. The voting slips that have not been used are stuffed into my pocket. I have already written on them, lots of different ticks.

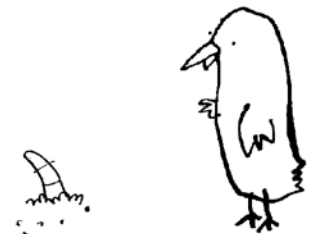
My hands feel sticky and hot as I pull them out. There's a bang and I stiffen up against the wall. It's Tiger. He comes in and starts pulling his football kit off a peg.

I stuff the voting slips back into my pocket but he sees me.

He straightens his neck, like an animal. 'Don't do it,' he says.

I think, at this point, I stop breathing completely.

'It's really good what you done.' Then, like a ghost, he disappears into the corridor.





We are all standing outside.

'Today' says Viola, 'It is really cold. I want you to imagine coming into this garden to play in the spring. As you dig, keep thinking about the Mango Tree garden that we are going to make.'

That's right; the Mango Tree garden. My garden. The garden with the most votes!

Last night they took my grandma off the oxygen. She's breathing on her own again.

'It sounds like a café' says Ryan.

'Just because you wanted planets' says Bella.

'The Mango Tree garden was the best' says Yasmin. I like Yasmin now.



Yasmin wants to be in my group. We start to dig the garden. Viola tells everybody what to do and younger classes come out to help us dig.

It's really cold. Two teachers help Viola lift giant stones out of the earth. By the end of the morning the ground is clear. We sit on the stones, our coats pulled up over our heads and faces.

Viola, in her big boots, starts to pull at the prickly bush. 'It's coming off the wall' she says to us, 'It's letting go.'

'Stop!' Mr Taylor is rushing across the playground towards us. 'Wait, there's a problem. We aren't allowed to change the wall. We need special permission. Somebody's put in a complaint.'

'But it's dangerous' says Viola. 'It's overgrown, it's diseased, it's choking everything.'

'I'm sorry,' says Mr Taylor. 'But we'll have to wait.'



The waiting seems to take forever. Waiting to make the garden. Waiting to see if my grandma's ever going to come out of hospital.

Viola takes me to one side. 'I'm sorry' she says. 'We won't be able to grow a real mango, you know. It's just not warm enough here. We could paint one on the wall, instead, if we're allowed.'

I feel icy cold inside. Everything is

going wrong. They stop us going into the garden. Apparently the ground is too dangerous. We might fall into the holes. The holes are filling up with water. The ground is turning into mud. Viola doesn't come in anymore because she says there's nothing for her to do. I think she's angry that Mr Taylor hasn't sorted everything out. I sit in the corner, quiet as a mouse.



Mr Taylor feels sorry for me. 'After lunch,' he says, 'You can look 'mango tree' up on the internet.'

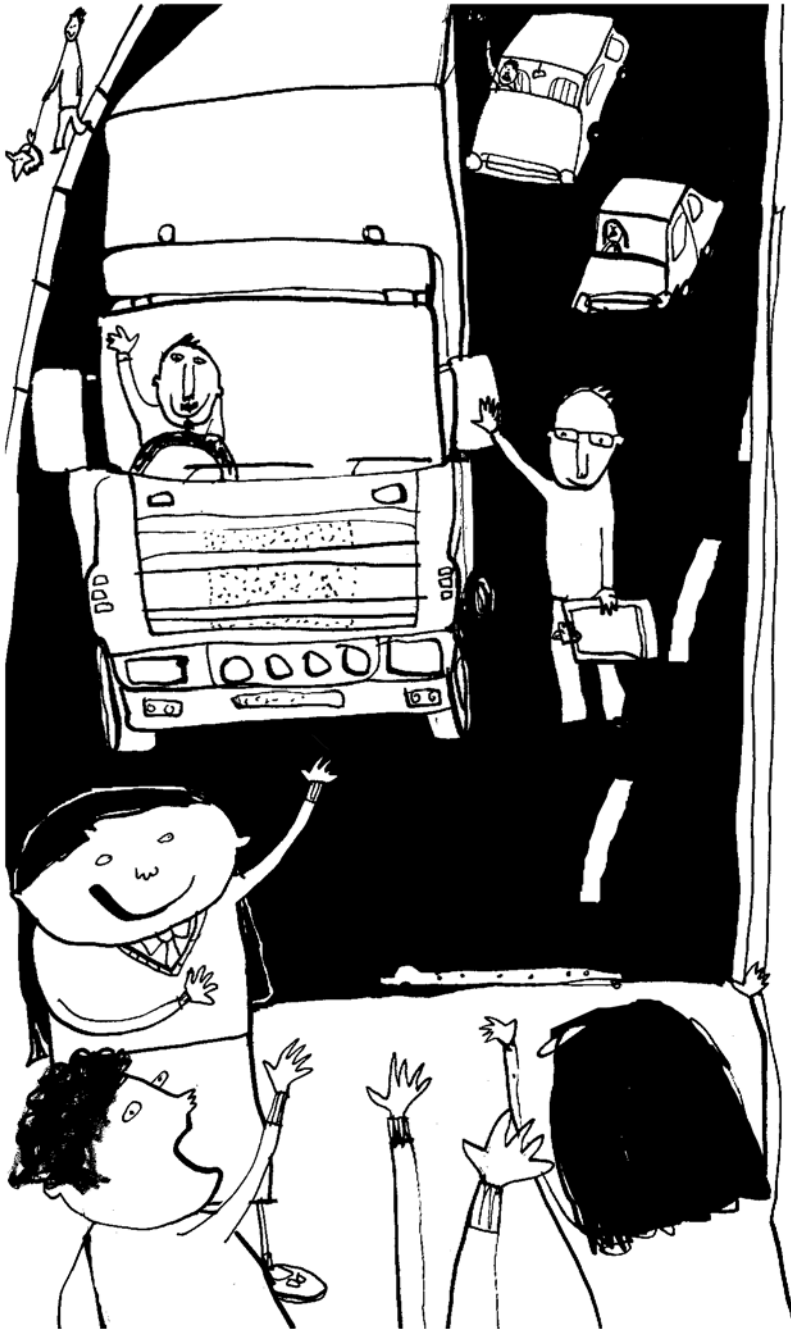
The computer says *Mango: Grow It*. It says *mango trees grow very large outside in the tropics, but they can be*

*grown as smaller plants in pots inside, if it's warm enough.*

So where could we grow it? I research that too. Then I get some white paper and write the school address at the top. We learnt this in year 2. I am writing to a garden company that sells greenhouses.

*'Dear Garden Company' I write,  
'Help me, please. My grandma is ill.'*





The garden company decides to donate a mini dome to our school. The dome is for growing exotic plants in climates like ours. It arrives on a big lorry from the shop. The lorry parks up outside the school and annoys all the drivers who try to pass it. We don't care about the hooting. We are louder, whistling and throwing our arms up in the air as they open the back and lift out the sections.

It is wrapped in plastic and comes in pieces. We watch two men lay it down in the corridor on the floor. Each piece is a hexagon of polythene, like the thin skin of a star that has fallen from the sky and shattered right here in our school.

When they finish, the men come to our classroom. One of them nods to the teacher. 'You going to sign for this, then?'

Mr Taylor looks at me. I stand up and walk straight over to them. I write my name slowly and clearly on the line where the man's finger is pointing.

'That's it, then,' he says, and the men leave. 'Now,' Mr Taylor grunts, 'If you've quite finished signing for deliveries perhaps we could get on with some work.'



Mr Taylor doesn't seem that excited when he tells us that we can take down the prickly bush. He says the project is taking up too much of his time.

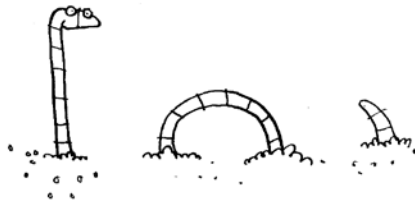
Our class walk around like heroes. Viola starts an after school gardening club. Anybody who goes to our school can join. Even teachers. We sow seeds and prick out seedlings and replant them into pots.



Do you know what it's like when a seed comes to the surface of the soil and breaks through into two small leaves? Maybe you do. But it isn't just that. Do you know how angry you feel when a snail makes your plant his dinner and how good you feel when you smash him to pieces with your foot, until he is just a dribble of slime on your shoe.

Ryan stares at me.

'Yes, girls can do things like that, too, Ryan' I say.



There are things you have to learn about the garden. One thing you have to learn is that it takes time. That's what Grandma said to me when she came home.

When I told her the mango seed was planted but nothing had happened yet, she said 'It takes time to grow things. It takes time for them to bear fruit. When things get sick in the garden it takes time for them to get better. Sometimes they don't.'

I think she was talking about herself. Dad says she's lost her confidence.



You have to have confidence to put up a dome. It's not easy. Mr Taylor swore a few times. I can see I'm going to need to have enough confidence for everybody.

The dome is like a giant beehive or maybe an Eskimo's igloo. It glistens in the sunshine.

'You've got your planet, boys' says Bella to Ryan, Tiger and Marco.

Viola has stopped coming in now. She says it is one of the endings of this story and that she prefers beginnings.

We all work in the garden after school once a week. One of our teachers works with us. We've got honeysuckle and lavender and grass and a banana shaped seat made

of wood for children to sit on, and in the dome we've got seedlings, cucumbers, plants and the mango tree. We have to have the heating on for the mango tree.



The day my grandma comes home she lies down on her bed for hours. As it gets dark I can hear her breath, snorting and whistling into the air. It sounds funny to you, but I don't mind the noise.

A week later, even though she is tired, she drags herself up the road to meet me after school.

Children are running in and out of our school garden. Some of my





friends wave and smile at her and she likes that. Lots of them are going to my next school.

I can't wait to show her the garden. I feel really proud as Grandma and I squeeze into the dome together.

It's hot in there and she wrestles with her coat.

'Can I help you?' I say.

'You have.' She says as she points

to the little seedling, the leaves of the tiny Mango Tree. 'I know what that is' she says.

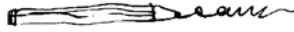
'Viola says it will take a long time to grow' I say.

Grandma bends over slowly, putting her face up to the plant and talking to it. 'This' she says, 'This, Mango Tree, is my grandchild.' And then she smiles a giant smile. 'Nice to see you again, Mango Tree' she says. 'It's been a long time.'





## QUESTIONS



1. Before long you will realise that this story is being told by a girl, Nadine. How would you describe her character?
2. What do we learn about mango trees and mangos from the story? How does it bring good luck to Nadine?

3. What images does the writer use to help you imagine the dome? Make a sketch of what it might look like.
4. Why is the Mango Tree so important to Nadine's Grandma? And why is Grandma so important to Nadine?



## EXERCISES



- 1a. Draw the garden that you think the children made in the story.

OR

- 1b. Make a drawing/design for a garden that you would like to grow.
2. Write an entry in Nadine's diary on one of the following:
- a. the day she found out she had won the design for the garden.
  - b. the day she almost got caught cheating.
  - c. the day her grandma went into hospital.



# The Mango Tree

*by Jane Buckler*

Creative Partnerships London East and South is keen to explore different ways of telling the stories of the projects we support.

Jane Buckler visited a number of schools and met young people who have been involved in projects to talk to them about their work and their experience of working with creative people.

We hope you enjoy this story.



Creative Partnerships

**Creative Partnerships London East and South**  
Discover, 1 Bridge Terrace, Stratford, London E15 4BG

T 020 8536 5558 F 020 8555 3948

E [londoneastandsouth@creative-partnerships.com](mailto:londoneastandsouth@creative-partnerships.com)

[www.creative-partnerships.com/london](http://www.creative-partnerships.com/london)

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