

# 1

At the start we think he's just another kid like us. Of course we do. What else would we think? He turns up on a Monday morning, last week of the Easter term, in the middle of assembly. Mrs Hoolihan's taking it. We can see she's excited about something or other. She's wearing a green tweed suit and shiny black high heels and her hair's all dyed and curled. She keeps looking at the door at the back of the hall, like she expects it to open.

She says all the usual stuff about how terrible bullying is.

"Don't you agree?" she asks us.

Of course we do.

"Yes, Mrs Hoolihan! Yes, Mrs Hoolihan!" What else would we say?

I'm sitting with Maxie Carr, like always. We're

doing that thing where we grunt everything like we're animals or as if we don't know what words are at all.

"E IOO IA!" we grunt.

Maxie drops his shoulders and lets his hands dangle like he's some kind of ape.

"Yes, children," she goes on. "We have to be kind to each other, especially those who don't have our own good fortune, or those who have been through trouble. Aren't I right, children?"

"Yes, Mrs Hoolihan."

"E IOO IA!"

She looks at the door again. Nothing. She blinks and frowns and grins and taps her finger in the air and looks at Mr McKenna, who starts banging away at the piano. Mrs Imani is there as well, with the little orchestra she's put together. They saw their fiddles, squeak their recorders, smack their tambourines.



Mrs Hoolihan spreads her arms wide.  
“Now liberate your voices, children!” she calls.  
“Sing up! Sing up!”  
She tilts her head towards the ceiling.  
“Raise your voices to the heavens above!”  
And off we go with the song we sing every  
Monday morning:

*“All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.”*

The little ones at the front sing high and sweet like always. Me and Maxie do that thing where we sing the words as we’re breathing in, so we sound like ghosts or like we’re about to croak:

“O I I A U E U. U O R O A Y E M O R.”

Some kids around us start to giggle. Our teacher, Mr Sage, who’s sitting at the end of our row, starts to glare.



Mrs Hoolihan wafts her arms, conducting us all. Then the door at the back suddenly swings open. She jumps in surprise then spreads her arms in welcome as a woman and a boy step into the hall. Mrs Hoolihan waves at us to keep singing and waves at the little orchestra to keep playing. She waves at the woman and the boy. She indicates the PE benches like she's telling them to sit down there. They do that. She wafts her hands at them like she's asking them to sing along too. They don't do that. The woman and the boy sit there with their mouths shut. They stare out at us all. They don't move.

At last we get towards the final "*Lord God made them all.*" By now, me and Maxie are grunting like two daft dying pigs. Mr McKenna gives a couple more twirls and thumps on the piano keys. The fiddlers, recorder-players and tambourine-bangers come to a halt.

Mrs Hoolihan claps her hands and tells us that was oh so wonderful, children.

"Yes!" she calls, beaming with delight. "The Lord God did indeed make them all!"

She bends down and whispers something to the woman on the PE bench. The woman smiles sweetly, and they whisper together for a while. Then



Mrs Hoolihan shakes the hand of the boy and she brings him to the front so we can all get a good look at him and he can get a good look at us.

“This,” she tells us, “is a new boy.”

She beams at us. This is what she’s been waiting for.

We all stare at the boy. He’s very pale. He’s very tidy. He’s smaller than me. He’s wearing navy blue trousers and a light blue shirt and black polished shoes. His pale hair is brushed close to his scalp.

“His name,” says Mrs Hoolihan, “is George. Say hello to George, children.”

“Hello, George,” goes everybody.

“E O OR,” go me and Maxie.

George says nothing. He doesn’t look nervous. He doesn’t smile.

“Welcome, George,” says Mrs Hoolihan, “to Darwin Avenue Primary Academy.”

He stares at her, then stares at us.

“We were expecting George last week,” she says. She widens her eyes and beams at him. “But it seems you weren’t ready, George, were you? But here you are now, a treat for us all in the last week of term.”

George says nothing.

She bends down and peers at him.

“He’s rather splendid, isn’t he, children?”

“Yes, Miss,” say some of us.

“E I,” go me and Maxie.

“Excellent. Now then, children. George will only be with us for a short time, so make him welcome. Make sure he knows all the ropes and the ins and outs and the how’s your fathers and the ups and downs. I know you will do that. Will you do that, children?”

“Yes, Miss!”

“E I!”

Mrs Hoolihan beams at us.

“Excellent. Make sure that his time here is something he will always remember. He will join Mr Sage’s class.”

Me and Maxie nudge each other. That’s our class.

“Now then, our bright and beautiful children, and our wise and wonderful teachers, off to your classes you go.”

