

*Sala and Monk*

*Us Together*

by Neske Beks

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## AT THE PUB

Three grown people, adults, are sitting at the bar: two men and an older woman. They're drinking alcohol and peeling peanuts. They toss the shells on the floor because that's allowed here.

A little ways down is a boy with red hair playing a shooting game on a mobile phone. He's completely absorbed in the game. His left thumb taps rhythmically on the screen as his right thumb peels the peanuts and flings the shells on the ground.

"All I want is to see my kids," sighs one of the two men as he digs his hands into his dark, kinky hair.

"Salomon, we understand that. But you should really wait," the woman says.

"Bear, they'll be thirteen in two days," Salomon moans. "Yet another birthday I'm not allowed to witness. The last one I was at they were turning two."

"Well, you *can* be there..." mumbles Wolf.

"Yeah, but only under her conditions. They're my kids too! She didn't make them by herself," Salomon scowls.

"She did carry them for nine months," Grandma Bear says.

"But I'm their father," says Salomon. There are tears welling up in his eyes.

"I want to pull that little girl into my chest, don't you understand, Bear?" Salomon sighs, "and with Monk, I just want to play, horse around, you know? Like you guys do, Wolf."

Wolf and Grandma Bear understand. They say nothing and look down at their hands. Wolf nods. Or maybe he's just moving his head in a way that looks like a nod.

“We’re working on it, Salomon,” Grandma Bear says. “*Poc-a-poc*— that’s Catalan for ‘little by little’.”

“But some things take time,” Wolf adds.

“Mom? I want chips!” Igor yells. Salomon grabs a bag of chips and takes it over to the boy.

“Okay, but this is the very last bag,” Wolf says strictly.

“I’ll decide that. You’re not my dad,” Igor says rudely.

Grandma Bear sighs. “Puberty...” she mumbles. “It’s the worst. Horrible.”

Salomon gives her a questioning look. “Does puberty already start at thirteen? Doesn’t it come later?”

Grandma Bear looks at him thoughtfully. She downs the rest of her drink and says, “It usually starts earlier in girls.”

Salomon’s ears prick up. “And what about twins?” he asks.

He has no clue.

“Well...” Grandma Bear sighs. “It’s hard to say. Sala is the friskier one of the two, most of the time.”

She looks at Salomon. “In terms of character, she’s more like you, I’d say.”

“And Monk?” Salomon asks.

“He’s kind of an old soul, more serious. But smart too. Sometimes I think that boy thinks too much. That’s it, I think. Too much thinking about things that a twelve-year-old shouldn’t have to think about.”

Salomon pours Grandma Bear another glass of liquor.

He turns around, and then they both say in unison: “So he’s his mother’s son.”

LETTER 1

THE LAST WORD, THE FIRST WORD

*Hello, hola, dear reader,  
Yeah, you, the person reading this –  
or...you know what, I'll just do it properly:*

*My dear reader,*

*Nice to meet you.*

*My name is Monk. And I'm the author of this book. Ever since I could write—by the age of three I could write all the letters of the alphabet, Grandma Bear taught me...so, from the age of three—I've always said that I wanted to write a book.*

*And now that it's almost my birthday, it's time: I've read enough books, and I've thought very carefully about the narratorial structure and perspective—Do I need to explain what that is?*

*“NO!”, my sister shouts. She hates all my explaining. She calls it patronizing. I don't think it is. Dissecting—that's what I'd call it. And analyzing. I analyze and dissect, that's just the way I am. That's what I like to do.*

*Hold on a second. Sala is saying something. She wants me to write it down.*

*(pause)*

*Okay, I'm back.*

*Sala says: “We're twins and live far away from Grandma Bear on an island in the great sea.” It's very important that I explain that, she says. And she's right. So I'm Monk, one part of the two of us. The other part is my twin sister, and her name's Sala. She prefers to call herself the other half. I'd rather not use the word 'half'. I prefer to think in parts.*

*Sala and I are the kind of twins that don't look alike. We're also a boy and girl. I read in a biology book that that means we're dizygotic twins. But we prefer to say 'the two of us.'*

*Yours sincerely, Monk*

## 1. GRANDMA BEAR'S SPELL

On an island called Testerep, in the middle of a great, wide sea, Sala and Monk are sitting in the grass in front of a long, red brick wall with a wooden door in the middle.

The island is flat and has lots of green fields, but there are only three trees: one giant lime tree, one weeping willow and one oak.

In her sketchbook, Sala draws the long, high wall brick by brick. In the middle, she draws the door. It's really more of a gate. But it's a door too.

The more she sketches, the more the door starts to look like a gate. And the longer she draws, the more the wall becomes a castle or a fortress—with turrets and corridors and rooms and a whole hidden world inside.

But Sala's not happy with it, so she rips out the sheet and starts all over again. She closes her eyes and tries to picture exactly how it should look. But when she opens her eyes and starts drawing, it doesn't turn out the way she imagined it. And Sala hates that.

“What are you doing?” Monk asks when he sees his sister thinking.

“Nothing,” says Sala. She shrugs and grabs a crayon. A row of *blah's* appears on the wall in her new drawing: “*Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.*”

Monk laughs and says, “You're so funny sometimes, Sala. What's that supposed to mean? You think I sound like a sheep or something? *Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah?*”

Sala keeps drawing in silence. She doesn't say no, and she doesn't say yes.

Monk scratches his chin and continues: “I talk. You draw. I write. You draw. Sheep say *bah*, I say *blah.*”

Sala giggles and continues to sketch lines. From the door in the drawing, a drawbridge emerges. Together, the drawbridge and the long, jagged walls

form a kind of beautiful fortress. Reddish-brown on the outside, and in the middle, between the two long walls at the end of the drawbridge, is a giant pink gate. Much larger than the real one behind them.

The only thing that connects reality and Sala's drawing is the big golden keyhole.

And even though the drawing is brighter and more colorful than real life, it's hard to say which life is better: the one here or the one there?

LETTER 2

DOUBLE

*Hello dear reader,*

*Together, the two of us, we count double.*

*Together is twice as nice.*

*Together, we are 9,494 days old today.*

*Separate, we're only 4,747 days old.*

*So if you can count, and you know how many days there are in a year, then you can figure out how old we are.*

*How old we're going to be tomorrow to be exact.*

*I'll give you a little hint: we were born on April 1.*

*But please, don't say, "Your shoe's untied!" because everybody says that.*

*Now I just reply "Shut your trap." And Sala says, "Kiss my butt."*

*Not because it's April Fools' Day but because I want to.*

*And that's that. Then they shut up.*

*Okay. Enough with the hints, no more peeking behind the veil.*

*"What veil?" Sala asks. Sometimes she doesn't understand me.*

*Our grandma, our mother's mother, so that makes her our grandmother, was born on Christmas Day. And our mom's birthday is November 1, All Saints' Day. In other words, we're a family of people born on holidays, but otherwise we're perfectly normal. Oh yeah—our mom's name is Cat. Mama Cat.*

*And our grandma's name is Bear, Grandma Bear.*

*If you think it's weird that they're both named after animals, you can just say so. We don't care anymore.*

*There are a lot of things that make us different from other kids, but that's normal to us. "It's just what you're used to," says Grandma Bear.*



*In the past, back when we still went to school, there were kids who teased us about their names. But now that Mom's homeschooling us, that's not an issue anymore.*

*Grandma Bear is fantastic. When Grandma Bear comes to visit on the weekend, she always brings a big bag of honey licorice and a bunch of unhealthy candy to share.*

*Yours, Monk*

## 2. WHITE SWANS, BLACK SWANS

From behind the wooden door comes the sound of high heels clicking on the cobblestones. At almost the same time, the twins whip around and stare at the gate.

“I thought I heard footsteps,” Monk says.

“Me too, but that can’t be,” Sala says. “Or should I go look?”

Sala knows her brother better than anybody. She can tell he’s a little freaked out. She is too, but she likes being freaked out.

She jumps up and looks out through the keyhole.

“And?” Monk asks.

Sala says nothing. Monk tugs on her T-shirt. “You see anything?”

“Yeah,” Sala jokes.

“You’re lying,” says Monk, and he yanks so hard on her shirt that she loses her balance. She falls on the ground, and they wrestle around in the grass.

“If you already know everything, why did you ask me?” Sala sputters.

“Come on, I know you...Sometimes I think I know you better than I know myself. Sometimes...” says Monk. “Sometimes...” He looks dreamily at the drawing. His sister *is* a really good drawer.

In Monk’s opinion, the world Sala creates on paper is way more beautiful than the real world. Actually, Monk wishes he could draw as well as she does. Sometimes, when nobody is looking, he’ll give it a try. But his drawings never look right. He can’t even draw a simple circle. All the circles he draws look like lopsided eggs.

Sala peeks through the keyhole again, but she can’t see a thing.

“It’s so stupid that the door’s locked. And nobody has the key.”

“Yeah, ridiculous,” Monk replies.

“*White swans, black swans, will you sail to England with me?*” Sala sings. “Remember that song? From a long time ago? When we went to school?”

Monk smiles and nods.

“*England is...?*” Sala looks at Monk expectantly.

“*...closed,*” Monk finishes.

His sister raises one eyebrow. “Well, keep going!”

“*The key is broken.*”

“*Is there no carpenter who can make a key?*” Sala sings.

“Carpenters don’t make keys, Sala,” Monk corrects her.

“But that’s how the song goes,”

“But it doesn’t make any sense. You can change it,” Monk says. “Mom taught us to think for ourselves, didn’t she? If the song’s not right, it’s not right.”

Sala plops down on the ground next to her brother. She doesn’t go back to her drawing, and she stops singing.

“*Is there no blacksmith in the country, who could repair our key,*” Monk continues.

“Nice,” Sala says.

“Yep,” he replies. “I just made it up.”

“No you didn’t. Grandma Bear sings it that way too.”

Monk winks. Then Sala shoots her brother a mischievous look.

“You know what, bro? Today feels like a good day to use my spell,” she says. “Today.”

“Your spell?” Monk asks, his eyes wide in shock. “You mean the magic spell we got from Grandma Bear?”

“You know another one? It’s not like I’ve got other spells, dummy,” Sala chuckles. “Yes, I mean the spell we were given when we turned twelve.”

Sala is just about to recite the words when Monk puts his hand over her mouth. “We’re only supposed to use it if we’re danger. Or in an emergency. Or...if we have a wish, if there’s something we really really want.”

“But I get to choose when I want to use it. That’s what Grandma Bear said. And we’re almost thirteen. We’ve had the spells for almost a year now!”

Monk nods. He likes the drawing, there’s something very alluring about it, but he’s not sure they should use the magic spell on it. Why would Sala want that?

As if she could read her brother’s mind, Sala adds, “It’s that door. I want to open it.”

Twins often know each other so well that they can read each other’s thoughts so really, there’s no “as if” about it.

“But a drawing is two dimensional. It’s not a thing until it has three dimensions, Sala. You can’t open a door on a piece of paper.” Monk always likes to know better than his sister. And there’s no question that he usually does—it’s just a fact.

“True,” Sala agrees. “But Grandma Bear promised—the spell can do anything.”

Before her brother has a chance to start explaining again or to tell her she’s wrong, she fishes a little gold bag out of her pocket, reaches in and pulls out a handful of golden sand. She sprinkles a little bit over the drawing and whispers the spell exactly as Grandma Bear did on their eleventh birthday—half to herself, half out loud.

At that very moment, way down below Sala’s feet, deep in the earth, a vortex of golden sand starts to form. It spirals upwards to the bottom of the sea, shoots up through the water like an arrow and swirls into a tornado of golden-yellow sand. The giant sandstorm blows in from the sea and engulfs the twins like a huge mouth.

In reality, it doesn't take very long at all, probably no more than three seconds, but for Monk it feels like hours—hours trapped in a whirlpool of golden sand. The sand fills his eyes and ears. He gasps for air as the golden vortex sucks them down into the drawing. When the spinning finally stops, there's not a grain of sand left on his body.

All of a sudden, as if landing in your drawing is the most normal thing in the world, the twins are standing in front of the giant pink door that Sala drew earlier that afternoon.

Sala walks right up to it—you'd think she jumps into her own drawings every day. Monk follows her, his mouth hanging open in awe.

Sala peeks through the big golden keyhole. "Still nothing to see," she says.

"Oh well," Monk says. "Too bad you wasted your spell on it."

Sala shrugs again. "I'm glad I at least tried."

"I think it was a waste," Monk insists.

"I don't," Sala sulks. Monk knows better than to say anything else. The twins sit down on the ground in front of the gate and look around, dazed. This place looks kind of like the island they live on. But not quite. It's a drawing. So it's different.

Not that it was drawn wrong or anything—that's not it. It's just different.

"I looked through the keyhole, and all I saw was black," Sala says.

"Look again, more carefully time," says Monk.

Sala looks again. And again. She pushes her eye so hard into the keyhole that the metal presses into her skin, leaving the shape of the keyhole around her eye.

"All I see is darkness," she pouts. "Black with little white stars." She blinks a few times.

"You have to look between your eyelashes," Monk says.

Sala's lost interest, but Monk pushes her towards the gate again. She looks one more time.

And suddenly, she sees it.

But what exactly she's seeing...well, that's harder for her to explain.