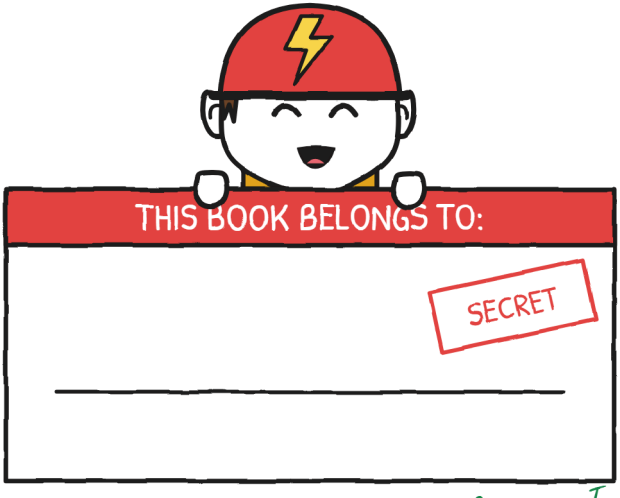


And I read it first. —J.

If you find it, return it. Please.

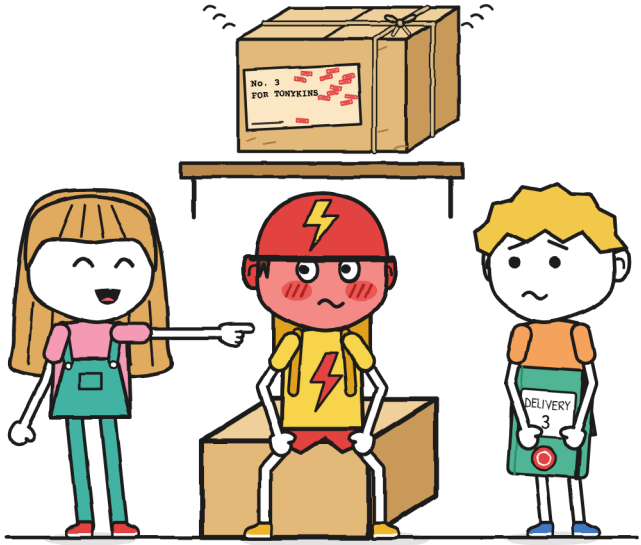


This stamp marks what only happens in the story: real packages don't fly back. With a real bike, the last page rules. —J.

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 3

Return to Sender, Please

Lui Eriksson



(Gus's notebook)

SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 3

Return to Sender, Please

Third book. Earlier: “This Package Bites” and “Do Not Open Before Thunder”.

Text and illustrations: Lui Eriksson

English version: LinguAula

SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

First edition: 2026

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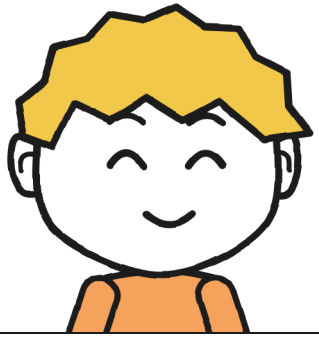
Typefaces: Andika, Patrick Hand, Caveat and Courier Prime (SIL OFL licence).

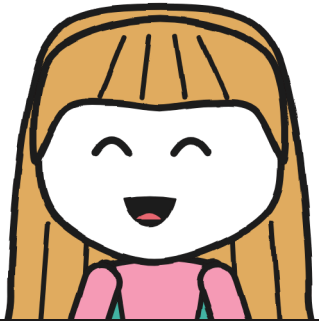
Work through every chapter at linguaula.com

No courier was harmed here. Red-faced, yes. —J.

WHO'S WHO



Gus. Saturday courier. Draws things nobody asked for. This notebook is his.



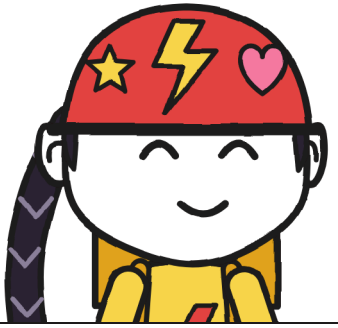
Julie. Writes in green and signs J. Always knows how to help. That's the problem.



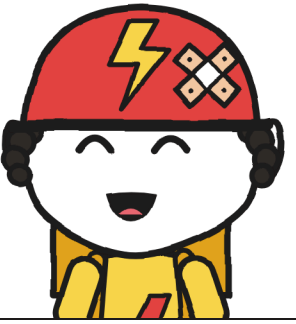
Tony. Rides for LIGHTNING. Ten minutes or it's free. Goes red in parts.



Mara. Owner of Impossible Deliveries. Wears a witch's hat. Knows more than she says.



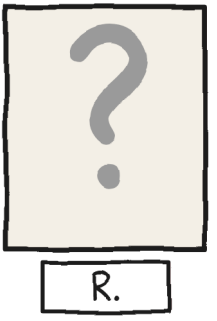
Zoe. From LIGHTNING. The fastest. Gives out nicknames.



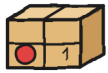
Bruno. From LIGHTNING. Got a puncture once. Two years ago.



Package No. 3. Rings when it's moved. The label only has a name on it.



R. Sends the packages nobody can deliver. Nobody says R.'s name.



CHAPTER 1

Ting-a-ling

Ting-a-ling.

It was a very small noise, the kind you only hear once everything else has gone quiet: a teaspoon against a cup, the bell on a toy bike. It came from the returns shelf, and the four of us left in Mara's shop went so still that you could have heard a spark drop from the stamp.

The storm had gone some time ago. Julie was still standing on my blue stool, with the green marker held high and the 18 freshly written next to the crossed-out 19. Mara had one hand halfway to the shutter. I, who don't know what to do with my hands even at the best of times, did nothing with them.

It was No. 3. And Tony, who delivers for LIGHTNING in ten minutes or it's free, went the colour of his helmet.

The notebook was new. Notebook 2 ran out on me in a single storm; this one is green, has the shop's stamp in one corner, and

I was going to christen it myself, with ceremony: a title on the first page and a new word.

DELIVERY NOTEBOOK 3 · by Gus. SECRET.

"Secret" means I read it first. And I don't tell anyone. —J.

I wrote the title with my tongue sticking out and went to fetch a rubber, in case it had come out crooked. By the time I got back, Julie had already christened it.

"Christened it to help you," she said. "You're welcome."

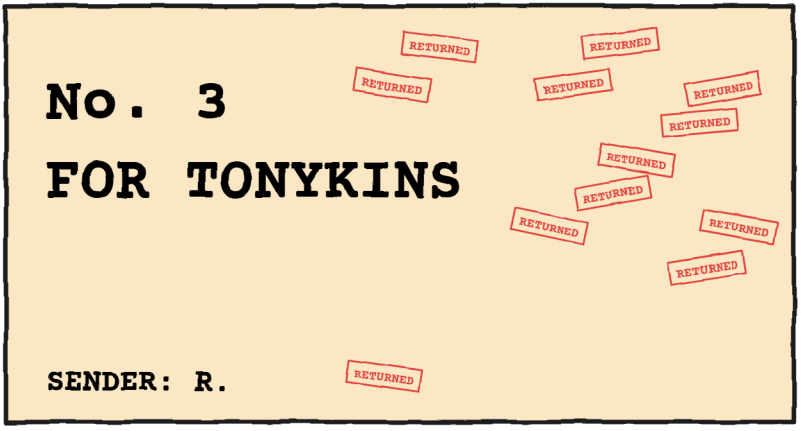
I hadn't asked for help. With Julie, that doesn't matter.

The rest is in case someone other than her ever reads this. The shop is called Impossible Deliveries and belongs to Mara, who is a witch, wears a purple hat and has a stamp that gives off sparks, smelling of a candle just blown out, whenever it comes down. On the shelf on the left she keeps the returns: packages nobody has managed to deliver. They have only one rule: if whoever receives one doesn't sign the label in ink that doesn't come off, at dawn the package flies back to its shelf, as punctual as a cat at dinner time. There were twenty, and they're all sent by the same person, R., of whom I already had six clues in the blue notebook. Julie and I have delivered two, a dragon egg and some seeds with legs that ran, and on the wall it says, in her handwriting and in green, LEFT: 18.

Julie is the one with the green notes. I'm Gus, the new kid in the neighbourhood: almost everything I own is still in boxes. And

Tony is the LIGHTNING courier, the one with the yellow backpack, who serves his punishment with us on Saturdays and who, since the storm, has a place of his own in the shop: a delivery crate upside down, next to the stools. Mara put it there without explanation. “For now,” she said. Nobody dared ask how long a “for now” lasts.

No. 3 was on the top shelf, next to the two gaps left by the egg and the seeds, with its label facing out. I went over to read it, standing, not touching.



Three typed lines: No. 3. FOR TONYKINS. And at the very bottom, SENDER: R. Between the name and the last line there was a whole field of blank paper. All around it, twelve RETURNED stamps. I counted them.

Julie jumped down off the stool and came to stand beside me. She read out loud:

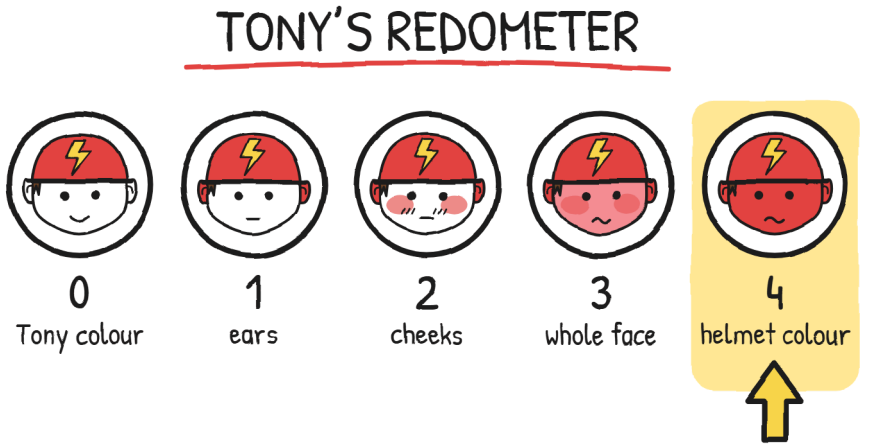
"For To..."

And she closed her mouth.

Julie never stops halfway through a word. I looked at Tony and understood why.

I read half of it. The other half I swallowed. –J.

Some people go red all at once. Not Tony: Tony goes red in parts. He started with his ears. Then his cheeks. Then his whole face filled up, right to the helmet strap, and there was still one last step to go, the worst one, which is when his face and his helmet stop being distinguishable. Ever since the shakeometer for No. 2, I can't look at anything that changes without putting a scale on it, so I wrote it down.



Julie reached out to the package to read the part she'd missed.

"That package can wait," said Tony, very quickly. "It's been waiting for years, hasn't it? So one more day. Or ten. LIGHTNING is in no hurry."

It was the first time I had ever heard LIGHTNING say that.

"Nothing gets opened tonight," said Mara. "And nobody touches the shelf without permission."

Julie's hand stayed in the air, a finger's width from the label. Nobody touched anything. And then it rang again.

Ting-a-ling.

"It was the door!" said Julie, in a voice I'd never heard from her: too high and too soon.

The door had been shut since Vera left.

When I don't understand something, I make a list. Ting-a-ling suspects:

1. The door. (Julie's proposal. Shut, no draught, and nobody pushing it.)
2. Tony's bike, on the pavement, with the LIGHTNING bell. (It goes BRRRING, not ting-a-ling. But it's a bell.)
3. The rubber frog. (Julie declared it innocent at once. She says she knows her.)
4. No. 3.

I put No. 3 last, out of politeness.

I went out onto the pavement to check. I took the frog with me, because you don't interrogate a suspect from a distance.

It had stopped raining. The street smelt of wet tarmac and every puddle had a streetlamp in it. I opened and closed the door: eeek. I rang Tony's bike bell: BRRRING! I squeezed the frog: squeak.

On the other side of the glass, Julie was wagging her finger at me: no. At every noise, the same, from side to side, like a car's windscreen wiper. It was none of them.

I went back in and left the frog on the counter. Tony, who saw me looking at him, wriggled in his crate.

Ting-a-ling.

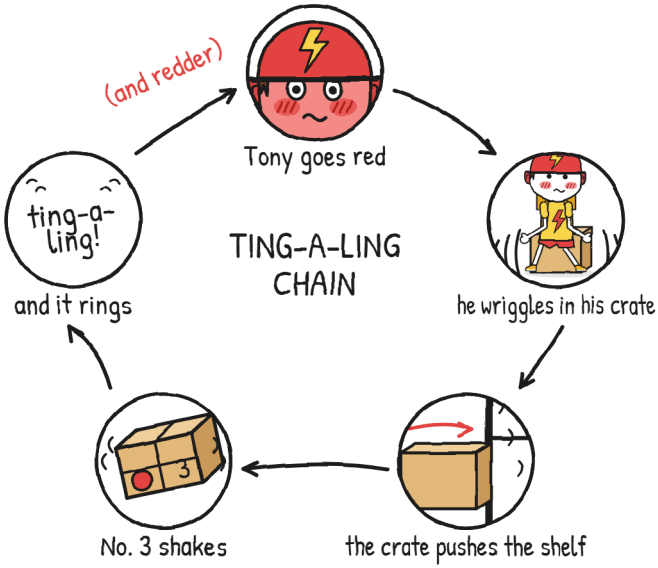
I crouched down. Tony's crate was leaning against the leg of the shelf.

I drew it right there, on my knees, and it came out as a circle, because however many times I went round it I couldn't find where it started.

It wasn't magic. It was Tony. Inside No. 3 there's something that rings when it's moved.

Like me. –J.

Tony followed my gaze to the leg of the shelf, looked at his crate and decided to keep still.



It lasted as long as a stretched rubber band does.

Still. Then, stiller: so still you could hear him thinking "still", with a drop of sweat running down his temple. Julie had gone a full minute without speaking, which for her is like holding her breath under water, and sooner or later you come up for air with whatever is closest to your mouth.

"Who is Tonykins?"

Tony jumped. The crate shoved the leg, the shelf trembled and No. 3 said TING-A-LING! with a force no ting-a-ling deserves. Mara looked at the ceiling, like someone counting to ten.

"It was only a question," said Julie. "Questions don't push shelves."

This one did.



"It was me," said Tony, looking down at his trainers. "When I was little."

He said it so quietly that the frog, which was on the counter closer to him than I was, heard it better.

Julie opened her mouth. I could see her questions queuing up, like at the bakery on a Sunday morning, the first one already holding out its money. Then she looked at Tony, who was still looking down at his trainers, and closed it.

"I won't ask any more," she said.

It cost her. You could tell by her foot: tap, tap, tap against the shop floor.

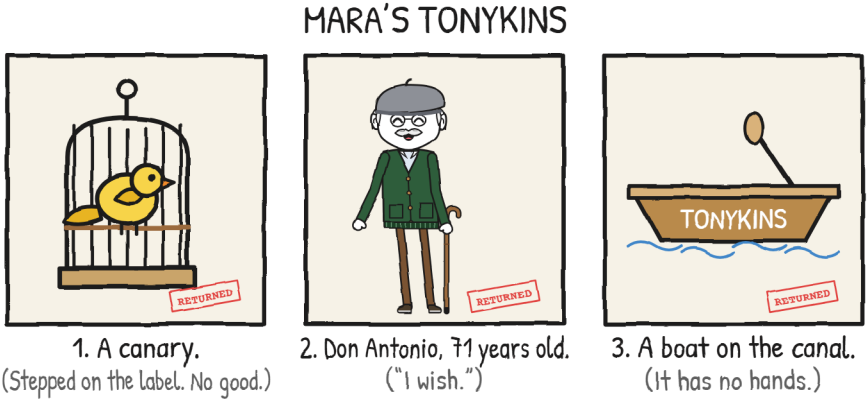
Questions I didn't ask: nine. I've written them down. –J.

"And why have you never taken it to him?" I asked Mara.

"Twelve times I've taken it." Nobody needed to count the stamps. "Look at the label: no street, no house number, no surname. I tried every Tonykins I could find."

She counted them off from memory, on her fingers, and I drew them as I heard them. A canary, which really was called Tonykins and which stepped on the label: no good. Don Antonio, aged 71, who put on his glasses, read the paper twice and said "I wish",

looking at it the way you look at a shop window. A boat on the canal with the name painted on its side, which didn't sign either, because it has no hands.



"What about Tony?" asked Julie.

"The last time I tried, I didn't know him yet," said Mara, and looked at him. "And nobody told me what they called him when he was little."

Mara pulled a purple cloth from under the counter and covered No. 3, the way you cover a parrot's cage so it will sleep. Then she asked Tony to stand up for a moment and moved his crate two handspans away from the shelf.

"There. Now you can move as much as you like."

Tony could have left. His bike was at the door: in ten minutes he would have been at the other end of the neighbourhood. He sat back down.

I don't know why. I'm writing it down anyway.

And since his crate has no backrest, I drew him one: tall, slightly curved, with a small cushion, in pencil and dotted line, and underneath, in small letters: "backrest (my idea)".

Nobody asked you for a backrest. –J.



At closing time, Tony stayed behind, doing up his helmet with a slowness that at LIGHTNING would count as a serious offence. Mara was switching the lights off one by one; the purple cloth was still over the package, on the top shelf.

"Mara. Tomorrow I'll come and talk about that. But in private."

"These two belong to the shop," said Mara, without turning round.

Tony looked at us. At Julie first; then at me. I sat up straight on my stool.

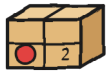
"These two, fine," he said. "But nobody from LIGHTNING."

He went out and moved off among the puddles, wheeling his bike.

The ting-a-ling had an owner now. What we didn't know was whether the owner wanted it.

I already know how to help him. –J.

That’s what worries me.



CHAPTER 2

I Didn't Say Yes

On Sundays the shop doesn't open. That Sunday, Mara left the shutter half up, just high enough to duck under, and hung a handwritten sign from it:

CLOSED (except for you).

Tony arrived at eleven. Before going in, he looked one way along the street and then the other, like when you're about to cross. Nobody from LIGHTNING was coming. He ducked under the shutter with his backpack clutched to his chest so it wouldn't scrape, and the shop swallowed him without a sound.

We got there at half past ten. Just in case. –J.

I had read the sign twice. Nowhere did it say "and Julie", or "and Gus". But Mara opened up without a word, her left eyebrow raised, and let us in.

We sat on the stools with the faces of people who aren't waiting for anything. That face comes out worse on me than on anybody.

Mara put No. 3 on the counter and took off the cloth.

"Package number three. For Tonykins. Is that you?"

"It was."

"Good enough. Do you want it?"

Tony looked at the box. The box said nothing.

"I didn't say yes."

"You didn't say no, either."

"I said that I didn't say yes."

I had said yes lots of times, just so they'd let me stay. Tony was still there without saying it. I gripped the edge of the stool.

"Three sentences," Julie whispered. "And none of them is a yes. I counted."

Mara didn't push.

Tony grabbed the box the way you grab a saucepan that's scorching hot: with both hands and a strong urge to let go. He weighed it. He turned it over. He held it up to his ear and shook it a tiny bit.

Ting-a-ling.

He let go of it fast and stood looking at his hands.

"What if he takes it home?" said Julie. "If the package sleeps at the house of whoever receives it, it's already delivered. It's only logical."

"The return stamp doesn't work by logic," said Mara. "It works by ink."

"The stamp and I don't think alike," murmured Julie, which is the closest thing to a surrender I've ever heard from her.

To make it clear, I drew up a table. It's called DOES IT COUNT AS DELIVERY?

- Looking at it: no.
- Grabbing it: no.
- Taking it home: no.
- Signing the label in ink that doesn't come off: yes.

"This delivery is yours," Mara told Julie and me, "like the thunder one. With three conditions."

She counted them off on her fingers.

1. You two don't open the box. And the label stays stuck on.
2. No. 3 leaves the shop only when Tony asks for it.
3. Whoever receives it signs, if they want to. If they don't, the package comes back at dawn, and nothing has happened here.

Julie raised her hand, like in class.

"And if he never wants to?"

"Then never."

"Never" isn't a delivery deadline. —J.

Tony was quiet for a long time. Julie timed it: four minutes. For LIGHTNING, almost half a delivery. In those four minutes he looked at the package, he looked at the door and he looked at his hands. What he didn't look at was us, and I was grateful.

"I'll take it," he said at last. "Closed. To think about. For now."

"Are you asking for it?" asked Mara.

"I'm asking for it."

I made a departure form, so that nobody could say otherwise:

- Box: closed. Yes.
- Label: stuck on. Yes.
- Asked for by: Tony. Yes.
- Signature: not yet.

Outside there was that Sunday-after-a-storm sunshine that leaves everything freshly scrubbed. Tony put No. 3 in his bike basket and, as he let go of it, it rang: ting-a-ling.

He stood looking at the handlebars, where he keeps the LIGHTNING bell, grey and round.

"What?" asked Julie.

"Nothing."

And he walked off, wheeling his bike. Tony almost never walks.

That "nothing" was a "something". We have to help him. —J.

From the door I saw two LIGHTNING bikes stopped at the corner, with their yellow backpacks: a girl with a plait down to her waist and, next to her, a very big boy.

"Tony! What have you got in your basket?" shouted the one with the plait.

"A delivery."

"Who for?"

"For a customer."

He didn't lie. But before answering, he slowly turned the box in the basket, so that the label faced him.



I understood the "nobody from LIGHTNING".

That night I left my bedroom blind up. I live opposite the shop: if No. 3 came back, I was going to see it. I put two chairs in

front of the window, one for me and a tiny one for the alarm clock. The little window above the shop door, the one Mara leaves open for that (on the first day I took it for a postbox), was a black, motionless rectangle.

"Gus?" said my mum from the hallway. "Why are you awake?"

"I'm watching a package."

"Oh. Well. But watch it with your pyjamas on."

For the first twenty minutes I watched the little window; for the next lot, the alarm clock; for the rest of the night, the notebook, because when I wait I need something to do with my hands. So, on the windowsill, by the light of the streetlamp, I improved Tony's seat. Version 1 was Saturday's backrest; version 2 has armrests and a round hole for a glass. I drew the glass too, with its napkin.

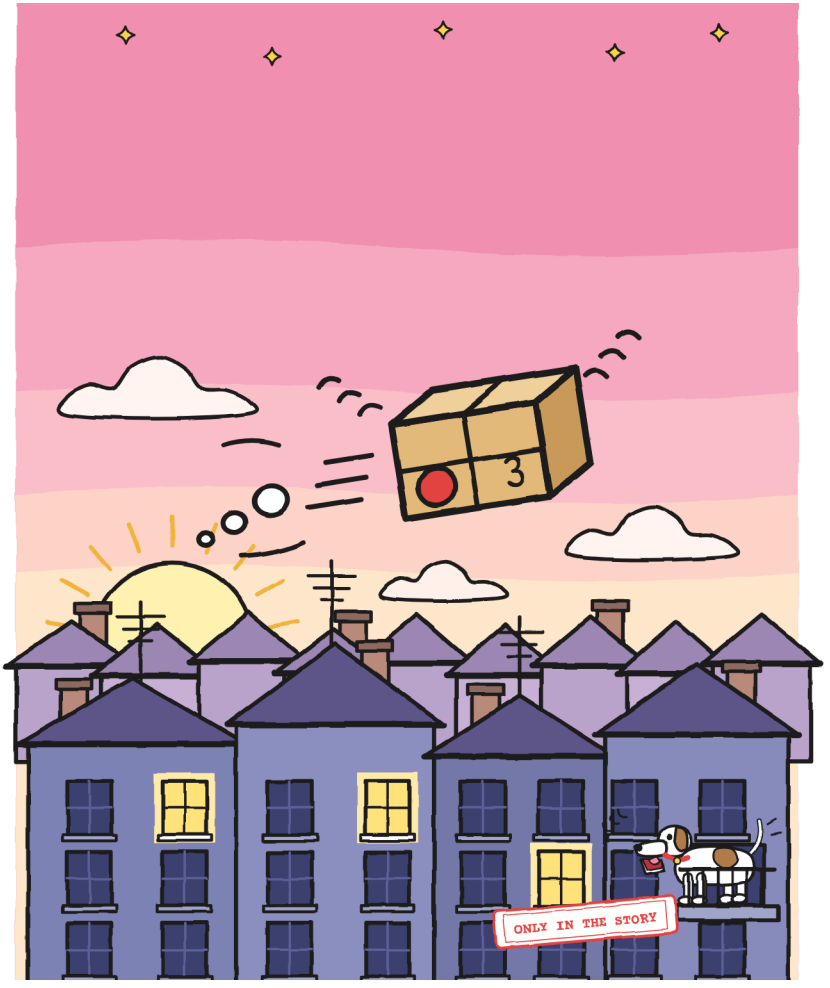
Julie wanted to keep watch as well, but her window looks onto a yard, and from a yard the only thing you can watch is the washing.

At dawn it was heard before it was seen.

Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling.

It came over the rooftops, unhurried, sounding like the ice-cream van before it has chosen a corner. A window lit up, then another, then another: three, as if someone were calling a register. A dog barked, the one at number 4, who barks at everything that flies, package or pigeon. And then I saw it: a

small square bundle with the pink sky behind it, which crossed my street level with my window, slipped in through the little window above the door and, once inside, I heard it settle on its shelf with a last ting-a-ling, shorter, like when someone drops their keys on the table.



“Was that it?” asked my mum from the hallway, in the voice of someone who hasn’t quite managed to fall asleep.

“That was it.”

“Right, then. Breakfast.”

I stayed by the window a moment longer. When my mum called me again, I went for breakfast.



After school we went to the shop. No. 3 was on its shelf and had one more stamp, red, the ink still wet, which nobody had stamped: thirteen.

I said it made me sad to see it on the shelf again.

“It’s not a punishment,” said Mara. “It’s the rule. Nobody has signed: it comes back.”

Thirteen stamps. At this rate you won’t be able to see the box. —J.

Tony came at twenty past five, after his round. He didn’t ask whether it had come back: he had heard it go over his house. He sat down in his crate, which was still two handspans from the shelf, and looked at the package without looking at it, the way you look at someone you know is looking at you.

I didn’t see this. He told me himself:



“I left it on the doormat. All night.”

“And why didn’t you take it inside?” asked Julie.

“There are enough people at home who call me that already.”

He said it without anger, in the flat voice he uses for addresses. Julie didn’t ask how many “enough” was. Her foot went tap, just once.



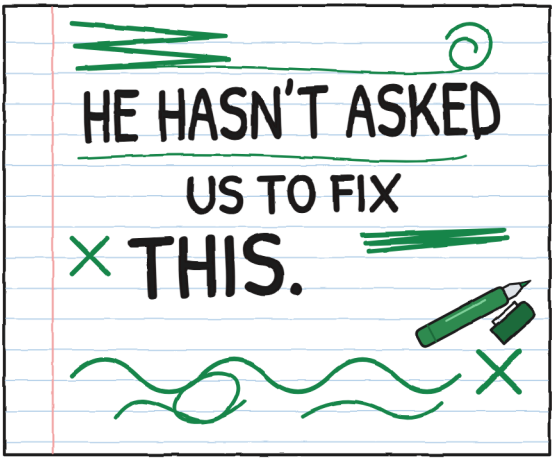
“One signature would have fixed everything,” said Julie when Tony left. “One. It takes two seconds. I’ve timed it with mine.”

It was true. She did it three times on a loose sheet, with her usual J: two seconds, two seconds and, the time it came out crooked, two and a half.

I opened the notebook and wrote in pen, pressing hard, so that the green couldn’t cover it:

HE HASN'T ASKED US TO FIX THIS.

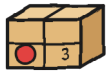
I pressed so hard that the sentence showed through on the next sheet, in relief. Julie took out the green marker. She tried stripes, spirals, a cross, a cloud of waves. The green doesn't come off, but it couldn't cover that sentence: it was still underneath, whole, in its capitals, sunk into the paper.



I've read it. I don't agree. For now. –J.

I looked at her.

I have another idea. Don't look at me like that. –J.



CHAPTER 3

Autographs

On Tuesday, coming out of school, there was a table on the pavement in front of the shop. Tables don't go out into the street on their own, and this one, what's more, came dressed: a yellow tablecloth down to the floor, a sign in Julie's handwriting and, in the middle, a covered lump, square and very still, the sort that seem to be waiting for someone to ask them a question.

The sign said, in green, COURIER AUTOGRAPHS. Underneath, TODAY. And underneath that, smaller: The fastest in the neighbourhood.

Behind the table stood Julie, with her hands behind her back and the serious face of someone selling tickets. Behind the shop window, Mara was on the phone. Or rather, listening: nodding, with her eyes on the ceiling, which is where she looks when a call drags on.

I pointed at the lump with my chin.

"It's a lectern," said Julie, before I'd asked anything. "To make signing more comfortable. I'm putting together an autograph collection."

A lectern, as far as I know, is for a speaker to rest their notes on. Not for signing. But she said it with such confidence that for ten seconds I doubted what I know about lecterns.

"Since when do you collect autographs?"

"Since yesterday."

Yesterday she had said she had another idea. The idea had a tablecloth.

On top of the lectern there was a lined sheet and, at the very bottom, a box. Or so it seemed: it was a little window cut out with scissors. I crouched down. The tablecloth had another one just like it, right underneath.

I lifted a corner. The lectern was No. 3, lying flat, with its label facing up: FOR TONYKINS, thirteen RETURNED stamps and, right under the hole in the tablecloth, a piece of blank paper exactly the size of a signature.

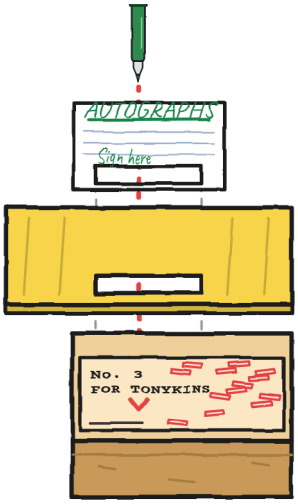
I only understood it completely when I drew it, which is how I understand things.

"With my marker," whispered Julie, delighted. "Ink that doesn't come off. Tomorrow it won't come back, and he won't even know until we show him. Surprise!"

HOW IT WORKS

1. The sheet, with its little window.

2. The tablecloth, with its hole.



3. The label of No. 3, on the part that's blank.

4. Whoever signs in the little window... signs the label.

She had the face of someone about to give a present she has chosen very well. Her fingertips were even green from so much marker.

I remembered Mara's conditions. I knew the second one by heart.

"Tony hasn't asked for it to leave the shop," I said. "Condition two."

"He'll thank us."

"And Mara?"

"She was on the phone. I told her it's an autograph table. And it is."

"And the lectern?"

"She hasn't asked me about that."

I reminded her of Flora and the eighth seed: Julie hadn't let Flora sign too early.

"It's not the same. That was a half-finished delivery. This is a shortcut."

"Then you do it," I said. "I won't."

I sat down on the shop step, with my back to the table and my arms crossed.

He sat on the step. Very dignified. He didn't help at all. —J.

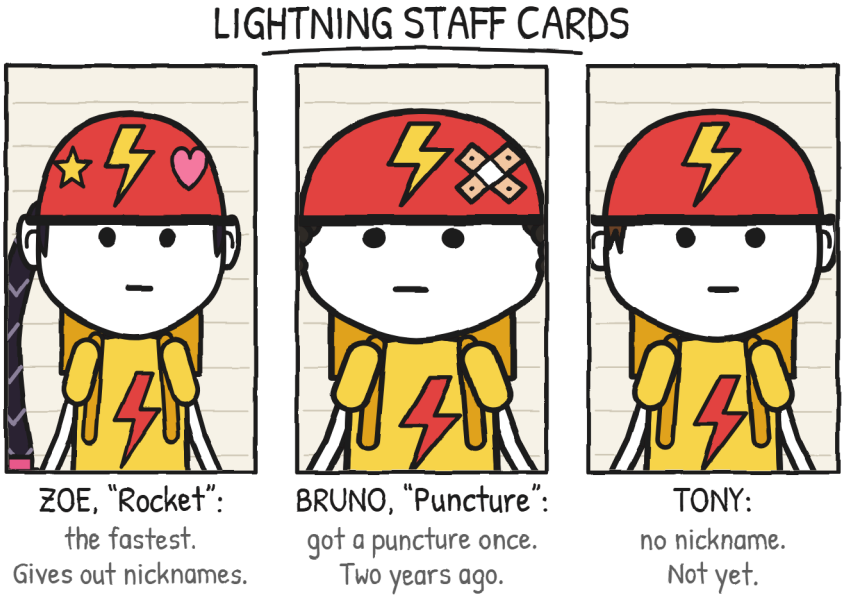


LIGHTNING comes down our street at ten past five. We heard them before we saw them, which is what happens with bells. There were three, in a line: Zoe in front, where she always is; Bruno, enormous, pedalling like someone transporting a wardrobe; and Tony last, a little apart, as if there were three bikes in the line and his wasn't the same kind.

Afterwards I drew them just as they arrived, one by one.

Zoe, "Rocket", is the one with the plait down to her waist, the one who on Sunday asked what Tony had in his basket. She's the fastest and the one who gives out the nicknames. Bruno has a

patch on his wheel and an air pump on the frame of his bike, just in case.



Zoe saw the sign and braked.

"Autographs? Ours?" she said, and got off her bike.

Nobody had ever asked them for an autograph. That's why it works. –J.

Zoe signed first, with a star in the o. Bruno wrote "Bruno", slowly, with his tongue between his teeth and every letter nice and round. Zoe took the pen off him, crossed it out with one line and put "Puncture" next to it.

“At LIGHTNING, nicknames stick,” Bruno explained, without getting cross. “I got a puncture once.”

He got it two years ago. That’s a lot of puncture for a single wheel.

Tony hadn’t got off his bike. He was looking at the table the way he had looked at No. 3 on Sunday: from a distance, with both hands on the handlebars.

“Your turn, Tony,” said Julie. “Down here, in the box. It’s the place of honour.”

And she gave him her green marker.

Nobody had ever asked Tony for an autograph before. He got off his bike and stood up straight.

I had turned my head away. I watched it all from the step, my mouth full of “it’s none of my business”.

I stood up. I didn’t even decide to: my body did it, like the hiccups, without consulting me.

“Tony, wai…”

I was too late. Tony yanked the lectern towards him to sign and, under the tablecloth, something spoke before I did.

TING-A-LING!

For a second everything stood still: the sheet, Tony’s hand with the marker a finger’s width from the little window, the four faces over the lump. I still hadn’t reached the table.



Tony lifted the tablecloth with two fingers, by a corner.



“For To-ny-kins,” read Zoe, slowly, as if reading out a prize.

“Tonykins?” said Bruno, and laughed.

Zoe didn’t laugh. Zoe was thinking.

Julie looked down at the little window.

Tony didn’t shout. He put the cap back on the marker, slowly, until you could hear the click, and left it on the sheet. Unsigned.

“LIGHTNING doesn’t sign traps.”

Then he took hold of the handlebars and walked off, with that clock-ticking noise a bike makes when nobody is pedalling. Nobody went after him. Neither did I.

He was the colour of his helmet, right up to the back of his neck. But it wasn't the red of embarrassment. It was a different one.

The redometer has no number for that one. –J.

Mara came out with the purple cloth. She stopped in the doorway, looked over her shoulder at the gap on the shelf, looked at the table and looked at Julie. She didn't ask who had done it.

She covered No. 3 and picked it up in her arms.

"This package hasn't been delivered," she told Zoe and Bruno. "And what the label says is up to Tony."

Bruno had stopped smiling. Zoe looked back once, at the lump, now purple. They got on their bikes and left without ringing their bells. As far as I remember, it was the first time.



I helped Julie clear up: the tablecloth, the sign, the sheet with two signatures and a hole. She put the marker away herself, without uncapping it. I didn't say "I told you so". I didn't say "it doesn't matter" either, because it did.

We folded the tablecloth between us, each holding one end. We brought the corners together slowly. The hole ended up in the middle.

"You didn't do anything," she said.

She said it to leave me out of it. It was a gift, and for one whole fold I came close to keeping it: I hadn't cut anything out, or taken anything down from any shelf. I smoothed a crease that wasn't there. I lined my end up with hers. I counted the paving slabs on the pavement from the step to where the table had been.

Fewer than twelve. They had been in front of me all afternoon.

"I warned him late," I said, looking at the tablecloth. "I could have said it sooner. Or called Mara."

Julie didn't answer. She took the tablecloth from me, folded it once more than necessary and handed it back.

Then she went in and told Mara, by herself, leaving nothing out. I stayed at the door, with the tablecloth in my arms. From there I could hear everything: the little window, the tablecloth, the shelf, the phone. Mara listened to the end.

"Tony," said Mara when she had finished, "you'll tell him yourself."



On Wednesday Tony went by at ten past five and didn't slow down. He went by fast, looking straight ahead, with that kind of speed that is another way of not being there. At twenty past five he went by again: I heard him coming, I heard him not slow down, I heard him go. For someone who delivers in ten minutes or it's free, going down the same street three times without

stopping in it is a very odd way of not going into a shop. It was quite a lot like knocking on a door.

I was on the same step.

The third time, Julie was in the middle of the pavement with a piece of paper. She had let Tony go by twice.

She held the paper in both hands, at face height, like the signs at airports, and Tony read it from his bike, with one foot on the ground, without touching it. Three sentences and a word: "I took your package out", "I tried to trick you", "I showed your label to the others". And underneath, alone and bigger, "Sorry". I know it word for word because she copied it into my notebook afterwards. It had no "but", no "I didn't mean to", no "to help". I checked twice, looking.

She signed it "—Julie". Julie signs everything with a J. This time she had put in all the letters.

"Okay. I've read it," said Tony.

"Do you forgive me?"

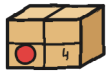
That wasn't on the paper. Julie pressed her fingers against the edge of the sheet.

"I said I've read it."

Tony put his foot on the pedal and left. Pedalling, this time, unhurried and without braking. Julie stood looking at the street, and then put the paper in the pocket of her dungarees, without folding it.

That afternoon, in the shop, Tony's crate stayed empty.

I signed with my whole name. It was the least I could do. –J.



CHAPTER 4

A Small Bike

On Thursday Tony walked into the shop without looking either way along the street.

On Sunday, before going in, he had looked one way and then the other, like when you're about to cross and you don't trust the cars. This time he walked straight in, helmet on. There was nobody left at LIGHTNING to hide from: the two who needed to find out had found out on Tuesday, tablecloth and all.

We weren't expecting him. Since Tuesday, Julie and I had been talking little and carefully, like two people carrying a tray of glasses between them. Julie had stopped making plans out loud, and that was what showed most: like when the fridge cuts out and only then do you realise it had been humming.

He had a bike under his arm.

His real bike had been left outside, leaning against the wall. This one was red, and so small that he carried it the way you carry a loaf of bread, with storeroom fluff on the handlebars.

It wasn't his. Or it was: it was his from before.

He walked past his crate without sitting down. It was still where Mara had left it on Saturday: upside down, next to the stools, empty. Julie began to get up from her stool and sat back down. She did it twice.

"Since Sunday I've had a ting-a-ling in my head," said Tony, speaking to Mara and to nobody else. "I think I know what it's from. I want to see if I remember properly. I want to open it. But not here. Somewhere with no shop window."

Mara didn't ask why. She took No. 3 down from its shelf and led us to the back room.

The back room has a bare bulb, shelves of string and wrapping paper, delivery sacks stacked against the wall and a small table, where Mara put down the box.

"Opening it to look isn't signing," she said, and she said it looking at Tony, the way you hand someone an umbrella: not because it's raining, but just in case. "Without a signature, it comes back at dawn."

Tony nodded.

Julie had stayed in the doorway, with one foot on each side of the frame.

"Can I stay?" she asked. She asked.

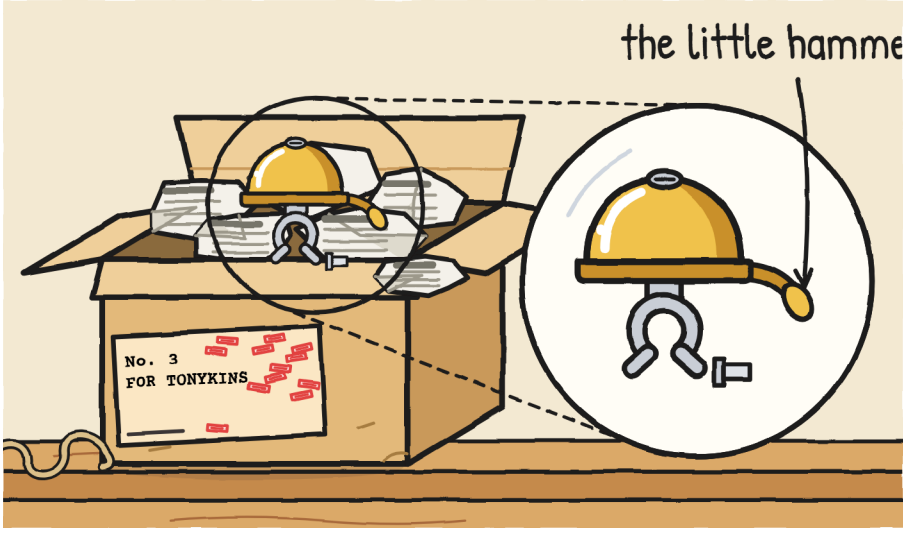
Tony took a while. I don't know how long: timing is Julie's job, and Julie was busy.

“If you don’t touch anything.”

“Neither the box nor the subject.”

She sat on a sack in the corner.

Tony took off his helmet and hung it on a nail. Without it you could see his flattened brown hair and ears that weren’t as red as on Tuesday. Then he untied the string, the packing kind, which had turned the colour of the paper. Inside there was newspaper, so old that it fell apart by itself. Tony opened it out with his fingertips. And in the paper...



A little bike bell. Small, golden, with a little hammer on a spring: all it takes is a shake to make it ring.

No. 1 bit. No. 2 ran. No. 3 just rings.

No dragon, no legs. A little bell. I like it. —J.

Underneath the paper there was a note folded in four. Tony unfolded it on the table. The handwriting was cramped and crooked, written as if on a moving bus. There was a smudge in one corner:

"Tonykins: I told you it would ring again. It rings now. Sorry I'm late. —R."

And, further down:

"P.S. You may have grown. The little bell hasn't."

Tony read it twice.

"What awful handwriting," he said.

And nothing else, for a good while.

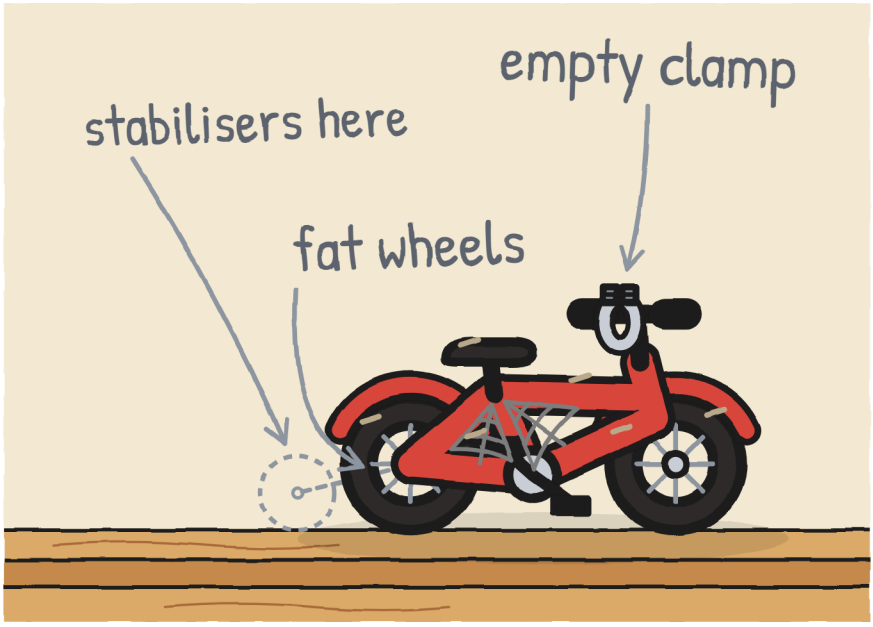
R. delivers late. Flora said so. She didn't say HOW late. —J.

Then Tony pushed the box aside and put the small bike on the table.

I drew the bike, with arrows.

Fat wheels; marks on the back one, where the stabilisers used to be; and on the handlebars, the empty clamp, with its screw.

"It was mine," said Tony. "It had this little bell on it. One day it stopped ringing: it went clack. Someone said to me: 'Give it here, Tonykins, and I'll fix it and bring it back.'"



“Who?” slipped out of Julie, and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

“I can’t remember the face. I remember the little bell. And that I waited a long time.”

Julie still had both hands over her mouth.

“At home they still call me Tonykins,” said Tony. “Not at LIGHTNING. At LIGHTNING I’m Tony: I wrote it myself on my staff card on the first day.”

I pictured him with the LIGHTNING pen, writing TONY in the name box without anyone telling him anything: the only name in the neighbourhood that somebody else hadn’t given him.

"And what's wrong with Tonykins?" I asked. I asked for real, without meaning anything by it. With questions it's like with hiccups: they come out.

"Nothing. Until Zoe says it. At LIGHTNING nicknames stick. Look at Bruno."

"Bruno has called me Tonykins six times since Tuesday," he added. "I've counted."

Julie made herself small in her corner.

Nobody knew how to go on. Then Julie asked:

"Do you still fit?"

She couldn't help it.

Mara lifted the bike from the table to the floor, with the care you use to lift someone down from a high stool. Tony looked at the bike. He looked at Mara. He sat on it.

He fitted. More or less. His knees came up to his ears and his elbows stuck out at the sides.

Mara made a noise that in anyone else would have been a laugh. And Tony laughed too. I hadn't seen him laugh since Saturday. On Tuesday Bruno had laughed; this time he did. It doesn't sound the same.

Redometer: 0. I'm writing it down because that counts too. —J.

Something had occurred to me, and I had to decide whether saying it was helping or pushing. With Tony, sitting like that, curled up on a bike that was no longer his size, the difference seemed about the width of a hair. I said it as a fact, not as advice.

"There's already a bell on your bike now," I said. "The LIGHTNING one. You don't have to put this one on it. You can keep it. Or let it go back."

"I know," said Tony.

But he looked at me as if nobody had ever said it to him before.

In her corner, Julie lifted her head when she heard me. She said nothing. You could tell she was storing it away.

She spent eleven minutes quiet, listening, with her marker put away and her hands in the pockets of her dungarees. I know it was eleven minutes because she wrote it down herself in my notebook afterwards.

Eleven minutes. My tongue fell asleep. —J.

"I want to try it on my own," said Tony.

The three of us went out. Tony shut the back-room door.

Julie went to the far end of the shop, so as not to listen. I, so as not to listen, drew: Tony's seat now has a canopy. I heard it anyway. Mara tidied some string that was already tidy.

Ting-a-ling.

It was the same ting-a-ling as on Saturday. Then another. And then none, for a long time. None of the three of us looked at the door.

When he came out, he had the little bell in one hand and the box under his arm. The small bike stayed in the back room, leaning against the sacks, with its empty clamp.

"I'm taking it until tomorrow. Unsigned."

"Then it comes back at dawn," said Mara.

"Let it. I want to know what it's like to have it for a night."

"What if he leaves the little bell outside the box?" I asked.

"I've never tried it," said Mara. "And I'm not about to try it at seven in the morning."

Tony put it all away inside: the little bell and the note.



On Friday, at dawn, my street rang out again: ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, over the rooftops, unhurried. The same three windows lit up. The same dog barked. Return No. 14.

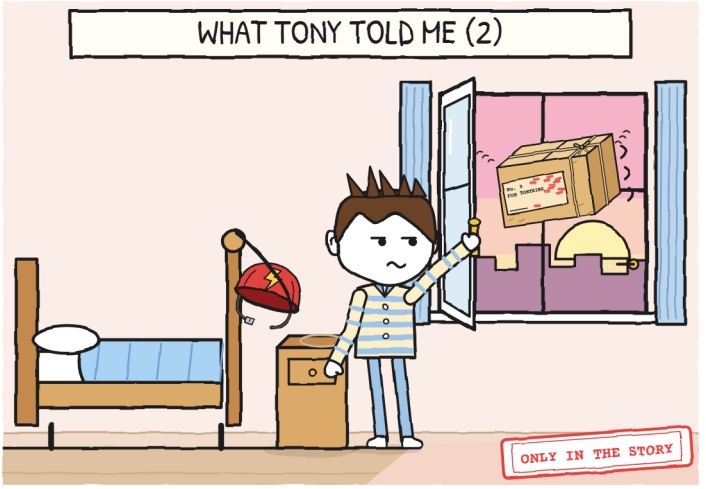
I didn't see what came before. Tony told me that afternoon, from his crate, looking at the floor:

"This time it didn't sleep on the doormat. It slept on my bedside table. At dawn it started knocking against the glass, and I opened the window."

“And what’s it like?” I asked. “Having it for a night.”

Tony took a while.

“Long,” he said.



He opened the window for a package. How polite. –J.

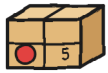
That afternoon I drew Tony’s two bikes, side by side. On the one he has now I put the little bell, which looks very good. Underneath I wrote “before” and “now”.

Julie stuck a little note on top of it, right on the handlebars, covering my freshly drawn little bell:

He hasn’t put it on yet. –J.

I tried to peel it off with my nail, from one corner.

She was right. It annoys me a bit.



CHAPTER 5

In Private

On Friday afternoon No. 3 was on its shelf, with fourteen stamps.

Tony, in his crate, was watching it from a distance.

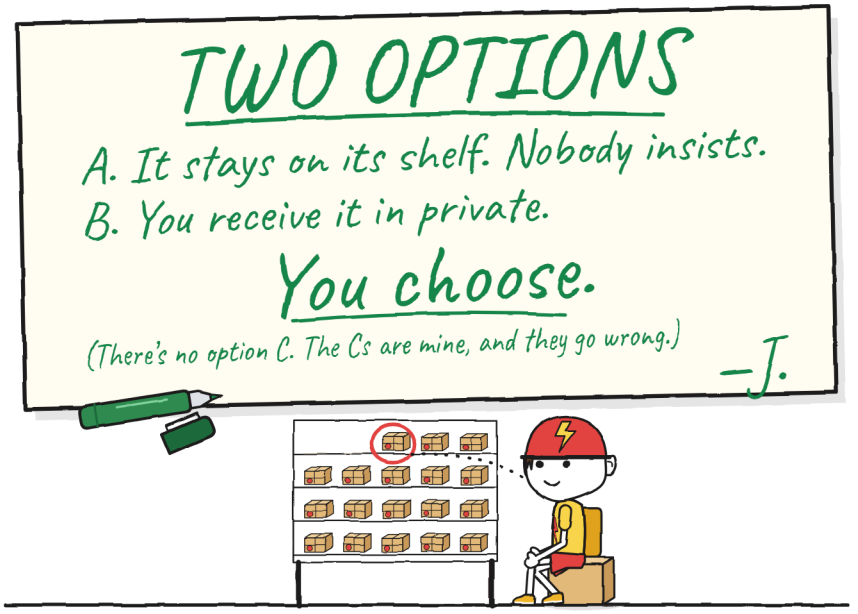
Julie had been preparing something for two days. I knew because for two days she hadn't told me what.

I feared the worst. The last time Julie prepared something in secret, the secret had a tablecloth.

This time, the first thing I checked was that there was no tablecloth. No table, no lectern, no little window cut out with scissors: a sheet from a notebook, with lines. Julie put it on Tony's knees without a word and retreated to the wall with her hands behind her back, two steps more than necessary. I counted them.

It was a sheet with two options.

Tony read it twice; the second time, only B. I, who had peered over his shoulder with the discretion of a periscope, read it three times, looking for the trap.



Tony raised his eyes and looked at Mara.

"If I sign, who finds out?"

He said it with his ears at one.

"I do. And my logbook, which never leaves this drawer."

Mara opened the counter drawer just enough for us to see: a fat book, closed with an elastic band. She shut the drawer with her hip.

"And LIGHTNING?"

"I won't be telling LIGHTNING. A logbook isn't a sign."

Julie opened her mouth and closed it again. Behind Mara, on the wall, the green sign still said LEFT: 18.

The sign has numbers. The names stay in the drawer. —J.

Tony got up from his crate. The crate made a hollow noise, the noise of a crate with nobody in it.

"B."

Julie didn't jump. I watched her not jump.

She clenched her fists until her knuckles went white.

"In the back room," Tony went on. "And I want you there. You two."

"Me too?" asked Julie.

"You're the one who most wants me to sign. I'd rather have you in front of me."

It fell to me to take No. 3 down from its shelf. I climbed on the blue stool and lifted it down with both hands, not breathing, like someone carrying a bowl of soup filled to the brim. Even so, it rang: a small ting-a-ling, the courtesy kind, that meant "excuse me".

We went back to the back room. Tony took off his helmet and left it on a sack, with the strap dangling.

I put No. 3 on the table. Tony lifted the lid and took out the little bell and the note again. He laid them under the bulb: the little bell, golden, on its side, with the hammer still on its spring;

the note, unfolded and smoothed with the edge of his hand, in R.'s awful handwriting, which in that light looked like a drawing.

He looked at them slowly, like someone counting his change.

"Before I sign, I look at what I'm signing," he said, without looking at anyone.

Julie went the colour of her T-shirt.

Julie handed him her green marker, with the cap on. She handed it over the back way round, point towards herself, which is how you pass scissors. Then she went to the corner and sat down on a sack, very upright, with her chin up and her elbows at odd angles.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm sitting on my hands. So I don't help."

It was literal. She had tucked them under her thighs, one on each side, and was gripping the sack with them. Her lips were moving; I think she was counting elephants.

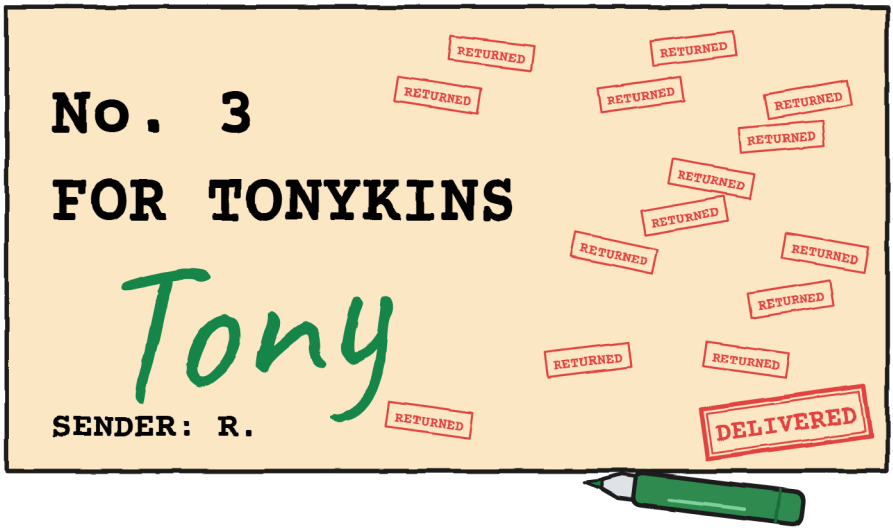
I had rehearsed in bed how to warn in time, in case it was needed. That afternoon I didn't have to say anything.

I closed the notebook and put it under my arm.

Afterwards he wrote it all down. —J.

Tony took the cap off the marker and signed.

He didn't hesitate, but he took his time. The T, big. The o. The n. The y, with its tail, which he drew slowly. Four clear, straight letters.



In one corner a stamp appeared that nobody had stamped: DELIVERED.

On the label it said "Tonykins". On the signature, "Tony".

"Is that all right?" he asked Mara. "It's not the same name."

Mara read the label from top to bottom, without touching it.

"Whoever receives it signs," she said. "And you've received it."

We went back to the shop. Tony had the little bell in one hand and had put his helmet back on. I still had the notebook closed. Mara switched off the bulb and came last.

She opened the drawer, took out the book from its elastic band and wrote down the delivery: a date, a number and four letters.

Julie already had the blue stool in her hand — the usual one, the one she uses to reach the sign — and was already on her way to the wall. She stopped dead. She put it back on the floor, legs down, without a sound.

"Can I change the sign?" she asked.

She asked Tony, not Mara.

Tony looked at the sign. He took a while, the way you take a while to check an address.

"It only has a number on it."

"Only."

"Okay."

Julie climbed on the stool, crossed out the 18 in a single stroke and wrote beside it an enormous 17, in the green that doesn't come off.

I asked first. For the record. –J.

Tony went out onto the pavement, leaned his bike against the wall and took a screwdriver out of his backpack.

"Are you going to put it on?" I asked.

"Yes."

“And the LIGHTNING bell?”

“That one belongs to LIGHTNING. This one is mine.” And he added, without looking up: “Will you hold my bike?”

He put it on himself. I only held the bike, and only because he asked me. The clamp closed around the handlebars, next to LIGHTNING’s grey bell. Tony tightened the screw as far as he thought was enough. Mara watched from the door, arms crossed, which in her is a way of applauding.

Then he tapped the little hammer with one finger.

Ting-a-ling.

At ten past five LIGHTNING went by. They came down the street in a line: Zoe in front, her plait in the wind; Bruno behind, with the air pump on his frame; and at the end a gap the size of Tony. Bruno braked.

“What’s that ringing?”

“A little bell.”

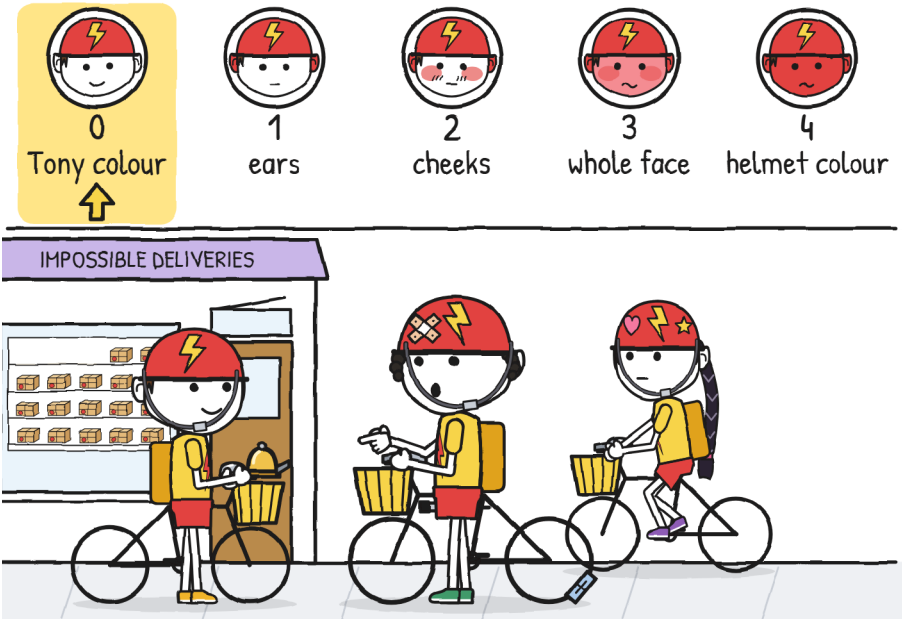
“Where did it come from?”

“It was mine.”

“From when you were Tonykins?”

I looked at Tony’s face. Nothing. Not even his ears.

“From when they called me that. Now I’m called Tony. And what are you called?”



“Punc...” Bruno broke off. “Bruno.”

“Exactly, Bruno.”

Bruno lifted his head like someone hearing his name over a loudspeaker. At LIGHTNING nobody had called him Bruno for two years.

Zoe opened her mouth.

On Tuesday she had crossed out “Bruno” and put “Puncture”.

Tony tapped the little hammer. Once, without looking at anyone.

Ting-a-ling.

Zoe closed her mouth. She thought it over. It took her as long as an amber light lasts.

"It sounds good," she said. "We're late, Tony."

She said "Tony". Without adding anything. –J.

They left in a line, Zoe, Bruno and, last of all, Tony, with his thumb always close to the little hammer.



That night I left the blind up again.

I also left the two watch chairs in front of the window, mine and the tiny one for the alarm clock, out of tradition, and got into bed with the alarm clock under my arm. That night I kept watch lying down.

"Watching again?" asked my mum from the hallway.

"Tonight I'm watching to make sure nothing happens."

"I'm very good at that. Go to sleep."

I held out until nearly twelve.

I fell asleep with the marker uncapped. I've got a green pillow. –J.

I woke before the alarm clock went off, my whole body ready for a ting-a-ling.

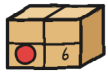
Dawn broke.

Nothing rang.

Not *a* ting-*a*-ling, not *a* window, not the dog *at* number 4.

It's the nicest silence I've ever heard on my street.





CHAPTER 6

For Now

On Saturday, at ten, I drew the shelf: seventeen packages and three gaps.

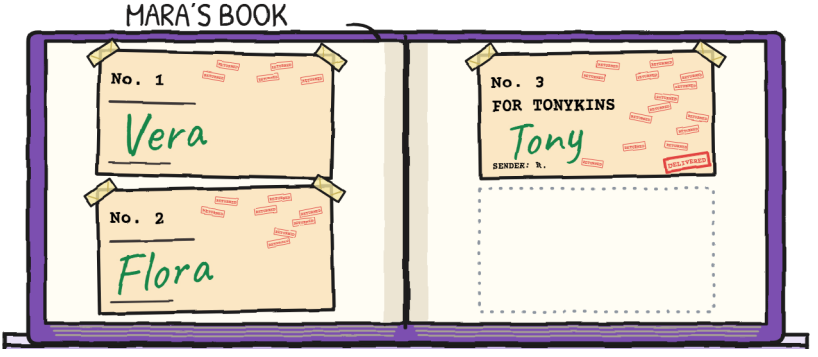
I had crossed the street dressed, which is progress: the first Saturday I did it in pyjamas and slippers. Before going in I looked at the little window above the door, the one Mara leaves open for the ones that come back. It was still open. Nothing had come in.

The gaps took me longer than the packages. In each one there was a clean rectangle, with dust around it. I drew them without pressing the pencil.

Mara, meanwhile, took her book out of the drawer and opened it on the counter, with her back to the door. She peeled the label off No. 3 and stuck it in her book, with the other two.

Tony, who serves his Saturdays the way he delivers — on time and without taking anything off — was watching from the other side of the counter, helmet on. His name, the one from the

signature, was travelling from the box to the book. He looked at the book. He looked at the door, closed. He looked at the book again, a little longer.



Thirty-seven stamps, twenty-three and fourteen. Three signatures in green.

An egg, some seeds and a little bell. All three arrived late. All three arrived.

The third one was signed by Tony. This time all I did was pass him the marker. –J.

Tony sat down in his crate and wriggled around. This time he didn't look at the shelf.

"It's still 'for now'," said Mara, without looking up from the book.

"For now, it'll do," said Tony.

"For now" can last for years. Ask No. 3. –J.

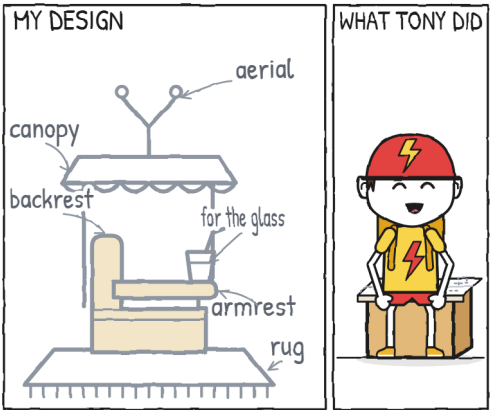
I showed Tony my design for his seat. It had taken me all week.

It was the final version, with measurements and a key: the delivery crate turned into a throne. It combined the backrest from the night of the storm; the armrests and the place for the glass from version 2; the canopy from version 3, with fringes, and a new rug, also with fringes. The aerial came out by itself, at midnight; I don't know what it was meant to pick up, and that's why I left it in.

I held it out in both hands, like a diploma. Tony looked at all of it, with the same seriousness with which he had read R.'s note. He didn't laugh once. I appreciated that. Julie looked at it over my shoulder with the face of someone recognising a relative in a photograph.

"Can I have it?" he said.

He folded it in four, put it on top of the crate and sat down.



Outside, the little bell had gone crooked on the handlebars. We saw it as we went out for some air: it had dropped half a turn to one side, like a head falling asleep on a bus.

"I'll hold it while you tighten," I said.

"I can do it."

He did it himself. I watched that screw. It seemed to have a hundred turns.

Tony stuck out the tip of his tongue. Julie, beside me, had her hands in the pockets of her dungarees up to the wrists; you could see her fists inside. I don't have dungarees: I gripped one hand with the other, behind my back.

When Tony made the last turn, the little bell stood facing forward, straight as a soldier.

"Done," he said.

I let go of my own hand, which is harder than it looks.

When we went in, Julie took the autograph sheet out from under the counter. It had two signatures, a hole and, since that morning, a patch: the little window was covered with a piece of paper and so much tape that the patch was the strongest part of the sheet.

"It's the one from the trap," she told Mara, before she could ask. "I've fixed it."

Then she set it down in front of Tony.

“Will you sign an autograph for me? A real one. With nothing underneath.”

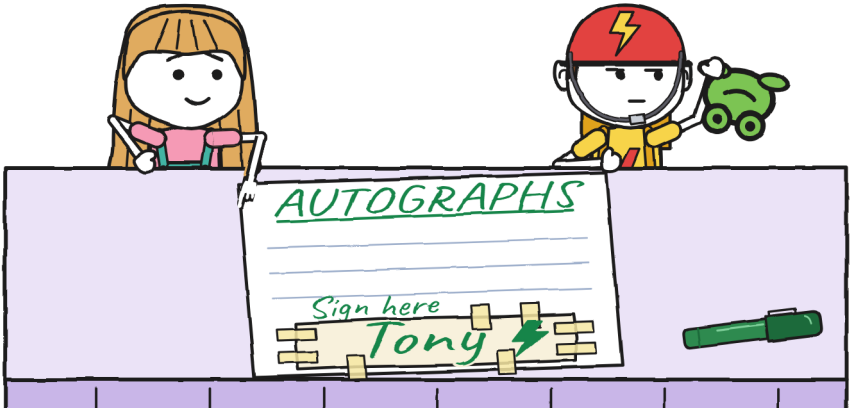
She said it slowly, once, and waited.

Tony looked under the sheet. He looked under the counter. He turned the frog over.

A muscle moved in Julie’s face when Tony lifted the frog. It was her only objection. She withdrew it herself.

“Okay.”

He signed on top of the patch: “Tony”, with a lightning bolt hanging from the last letter.



I deserve that. –J.

At midday, Tony went out on a delivery. I watched him go from the door, with the little bell firmly in place. A man in a beret was

crossing the street slowly, with his stick, at the zebra crossing on the corner.

Tony braked. He waited with one foot on the ground. Then he rang the little bell just once, so the man would know he was there.

Ting-a-ling.

The man raised his stick in greeting and carried on at his own pace.

Mara had come to the door, beside me, with her arms crossed.

"That's Don Antonio," she said. "Tonykins number two on my list."

He was the "I wish" one. He reached our pavement and stopped next to Tony's bike, which hadn't gone: it was still there, with one foot on the ground and a hand near the little hammer, unhurried.

"Is that little bell new?" asked the man.

"It's old," said Tony. "It was mine. From when they called me Tonykins."

"It's sixty years since anybody called me that. If you like, I'll swap with you: you, Don Antonio; me, Tonykins."

Tony thought about it. He looked at the beret and then at his own handlebars.

"Not for now."

Don Antonio nodded and touched his beret with one finger, like someone closing a deal and leaving it open.

"Here I am," he said. "I cross slowly."



Tony came back from the delivery in twelve minutes. Julie had timed them. She stood looking at her watch, but said nothing. Tony sat down in his crate.

I took out the file on R. It was a page with a portrait that is a big question mark and an R. underneath, and it had six clues. I added two:

- Clue 7. Knew Tony when he rode the small bike.
- Clue 8. Promised him a little bell that would ring. Took years.

Tony asked me for my pen and wrote underneath, in his own handwriting. Outside the list, in courier capitals, tight, the kind you can feel on the sheet below:

PENDING: owes me an explanation.

"And aren't you going to say thank you?" asked Julie. She asked it slowly, like someone carrying a full cup.

"The thanks and the complaint. Both. When I know who to say them to."

At one o'clock Vera came in, with Crumb in her arms and a twig in her hair.

"I've come to ask for help," she said. "Crumb can take off now. Now she needs a safe place to land." She paused. "Yesterday she chose my soup."

I sat up straight on my stool from the first word. Crumb had a noodle hanging from one horn. She looked at me and put on my "it wasn't me" face.

Yours, exactly. With a noodle. —J.

"Do you need someone fast?" asked Tony from his crate.

Crumb leaned out of Vera's arms and sniffed his helmet.

"I need someone who knows how to wait," said Vera.

"I know how to do that too. Since this week."

Behind him, Julie raised both hands, like someone surrendering in a very polite hold-up.

I can wait too. Is it time yet? —J.

When I don't understand something, I make a list. This time I did understand, and the list came out anyway: the last page of this notebook, the delivery table.

DELIVERY NO. 3. How long each one took:

- LIGHTNING: ten minutes.
- R.: years.
- Tony: six days.
- Julie, listening: eleven minutes (record).

Tony got up from his crate, adjusted his helmet and checked with one finger that the little bell was still straight. It was.

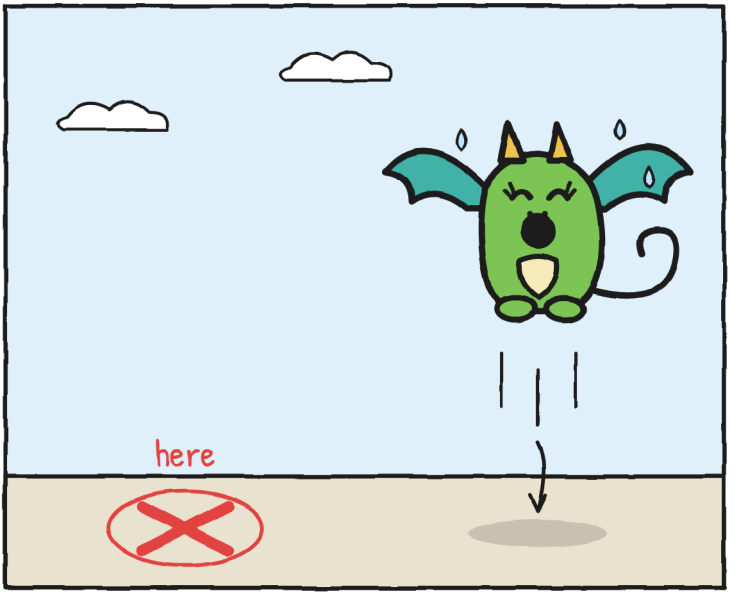
He went off on his round. From the street came a ting-a-ling. And another.

This time he was the one ringing the little bell.

I still ring on my own. I'm working on it. –J.

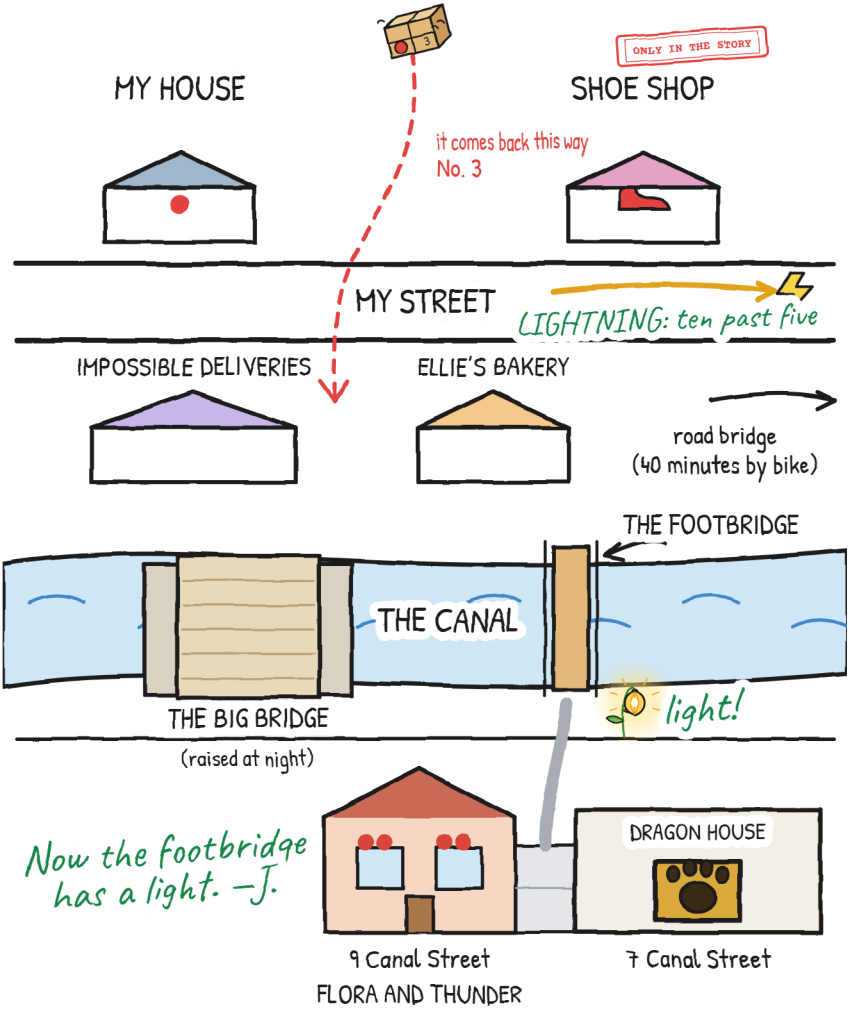
IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 4

(coming soon)



Where does a dragon hatchling who copies you land? –J.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD (version 3)



AND WHAT ARE YOU CALLED?

Tony used to be called Tonykins. Now he chooses what he's called. And you?

I like being called...

You can also call me...

I'd rather you didn't call me...

I'm Julie. "J." only when I sign. –J.

ONE STORY, SIX SIZES

This book comes in six sizes, for ages 3 to 16, and in more than 20 languages. XXS, XS, S, M and L tell the story page by page, with the same drawings and more and more nuance. XL is the novel: the same story, with room for everything Gus thinks and doesn't say.

CEFR levels as a rough guide: XXS, pre-A1 · XS, A1 · S, A2 · M, B1 · L, B2 · XL, B2–C1.

One size each. Same ting-a-ling. —J.

FOR FAMILIES AND TEACHERS

Work through every chapter at linguaula.com (with the size L activities)

A REAL BIKE: WHAT TO DO

1. Always wear a helmet, properly fastened. Even for going “just next door”.
2. Be seen and be heard: lights, bright clothes and a bell. The bell warns; it doesn’t give orders.
3. Keep both hands on the handlebars. If something distracts you, stop in a safe place.
4. The pavement belongs to people on foot: there, walk your bike. Before crossing, stop and look.

The ONLY IN THE STORY stamp marks what happens in the story, and not in the street.

BEFORE YOU GO OUT, CHECK YOUR BIKE

