

Shared. We fit. –J.

If you find it, return it folded.

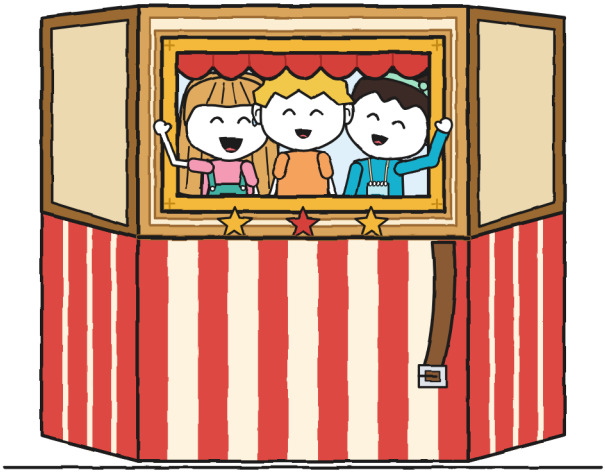
ONLY IN THE STORY

This stamp marks what only happens in the story: real dragons don't exist and packages don't fly back. For a real transfer, see the last page. –J.

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 6

A Spot for Three

LinguAula



(Gus's notebook)

SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 6

A Spot for Three

Sixth book in the series. Earlier: “This Package Bites”, “Do Not Open Before Thunder”, “Return to Sender, Please”, “Not Here, Crumb!” and “A Cake for Two”.

Text and illustrations: LinguAula

English version: LinguAula

SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

First edition: 2026

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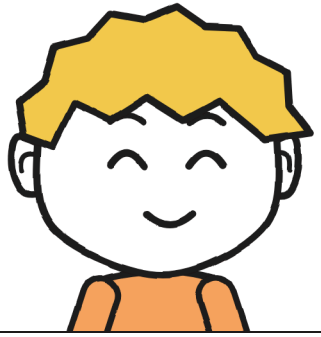
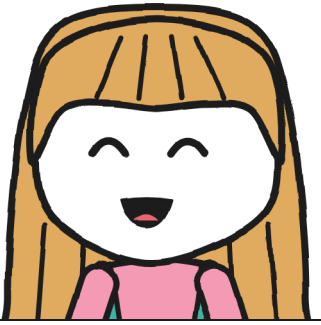
Work through every chapter at linguaula.com

Three carry it. I've chosen a handle. —J.

WHO'S WHO



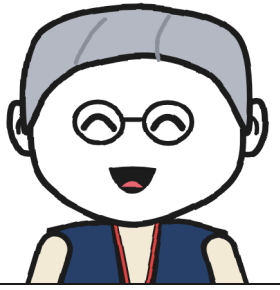
Gus. Measures in centimetres. This week he counts something else too.



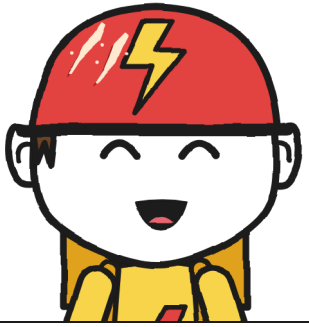
Julie. Knows the way. Explaining it is another matter.



Noa. Julie's friend from way back. Measures in steps: she always has them on.



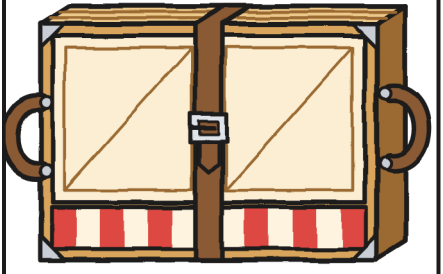
Irene. Runs the theatre workshop. She doesn't say which way: she says "stop".



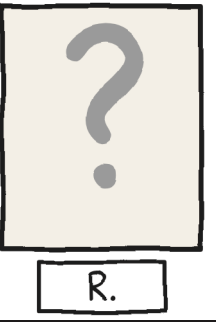
Tony. From LIGHTNING and the shop. Times things and gives no opinions. Nearly.



Mara. Lends the package. She doesn't let go of the box.



No. 6. A theatre that fits in a box. If nobody holds the strap, it opens wherever it likes.



R. Sender. This time R. left a line in an inventory.



CHAPTER 1

Why Does It Take Three?

Notebook 5 ended with two needles on a dial, and I closed it like that, without asking either of them to go away. A finished notebook stays the way you leave it. That's the good thing about them: nobody can argue with them any more.

Number 6 is orange. Tangerine orange, the kind you can peel in one go if you're not in a hurry, and it has the shop's stamp in one corner as well. Mara left it on the counter, next to the pink one, and went off to the back room to tidy some boxes that were already tidy. Mara doesn't give out notebooks: she leaves them where you're going to look.

For the first page I have a tradition. Number 2 I titled OFFICIAL; number 3, SECRET; number 4, FINAL; number 5, CALM. Four words with locks, and Julie read all four before anyone, myself included. This time I looked for a word that already took that into account.

At the top I wrote DELIVERY NOTEBOOK 6 · by Gus, which is what you write. Underneath, a single word:

SHARED.

And I left half a page free, just in case. I didn't know in case of what. I found out at once: it didn't stay free for a minute.

Julie was on the other side of the counter. She didn't ask me for the notebook; she pulled it over with one finger, uncapped the green marker and wrote on the half page in letters so big that they reached the margin, thought about it and carried on down the margin. Then she capped the marker with an "it wasn't me" face, which in that shop is a face that already belongs to everybody.

I shared the first page with my handwriting. —J.

I measured what it took up: the bottom half, all of it. My word, with all the air I had left around it, took up the top one. Two halves. It struck me as a very reasonable division.



The usual, for anyone who gets to this notebook without having been through the others. The shop is called Impossible Deliveries and it belongs to Mara, who is a witch, wears a purple hat and has a stamp that throws 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, all of them sent by R. 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. There were twenty. Julie and I have delivered five: a dragon egg, some seeds that ran, a little bell, an arrival kit and a

stand for Ellie's bakery. On the wall, in green, it says LEFT: 15. Tony, the LIGHTNING one, has his place on an upturned crate by the stools. For now.

On Monday, the day after Ellie's note, I came out of school and went straight to the shop. Julie was waiting for me at the counter with an envelope in her hand. It wasn't green or blue, the envelope colours I know. It was turquoise, and it was closed. She was holding it with two fingers, by one corner, as if it burned.

"The postman brought it. It says 'To the Impossible Deliveries shop'. I've been not opening it for a while."

"How long?"

"Twenty-eight minutes," said Tony from his crate, looking at his watch. "Neighbourhood record."

He had his helmet on inside the shop, with its two claw scratches, and his watch outside his sleeve, so as not to lose time rolling it up.

I know Julie. A closed envelope in her hands lasts as long as it takes her to find the flap. Twenty-eight minutes wasn't patience. It was something else, and I couldn't tell what.

It wasn't mine. Envelopes that aren't mine weigh three times as much. —J.

Mara opened it with a fingernail, tearing no more paper than she had to. The letter was in clear, grown-up handwriting, the kind that doesn't slope at the end of the line:

"I'm Irene, in charge of the theatre workshop at the community centre. While updating the inventory I found a line: 'Folding little theatre: pending receipt.' Do you have it? Saturday the 31st is the neighbourhood rally. If the little theatre reaches our yard folded, carried by a team of three, I'll sign for it on the spot. Noa's team has a spot for three and, for now, only she is on it."

Underneath, in different handwriting, small and upright, in turquoise:

"Julie: it's me! I do theatre now. Bring someone who knows about packages. —Noa"

Julie read the signature and her mouth went up on one side, only one, the way it does when she remembers something she doesn't plan to tell. She said "Noa" very softly, the way you say the name of a street you've walked down a thousand times.

"Someone who knows about packages." That was me. I liked the "packages" part. The "someone" part, less.



At five the two of them arrived.

Irene carried a folder, a navy-blue gilet full of pockets and a whistle round her neck. Her hair was short and grey and she

wore round glasses, and with them she went along the shop shelf by shelf, like someone taking an inventory nobody has asked for. Noa had a notepad hanging from a string and a turquoise pencil behind her ear. Her hair was in a high bun of curls, held with a mint-green scarf; her jumper was turquoise, like the envelope. Everything about her seemed put in its place so that she wouldn't have to look for it.

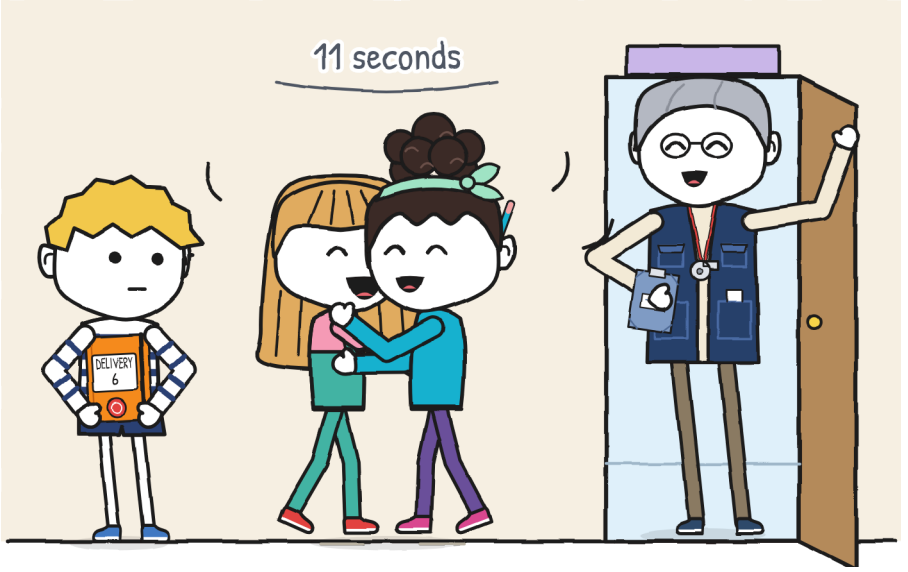
Julie came out from behind the counter without lifting the flap, by going under it, and they hugged. They hugged for so long that I had time to measure it: eleven seconds. I stood to one side, with the notebook. A notebook is good for that too: for having something in your hands.

"This is Gus," said Julie. "He knows about packages."

"Hello, Gus-who-knows-about-packages," said Noa. And she wrote my name in her notepad.

She wrote it in full, with the surname she had just given me. From where I stood I saw that I was the second line on the page. The first said "Julie", and had a line under it, like things that are already done.

Mara climbed onto the blue stool and brought No. 6 down from her shelf. A box like all the others, neither bigger nor smaller. The label had five typed lines: NO. 6. YARD WORKSHOP. ENTRY BY THE TWO DOORS. DELIVER FOLDED. And below, as always, SENDER: R. Around it, nine RETURNED stamps.



“Nine stamps,” said Julie.

“‘The two doors,’” Noa read out. “Which two doors?”

Irene didn’t know. Neither did Mara. I wrote it down with a question mark, which is what I write when I don’t know something and want it on record that I’ve noticed.

“I took it nine times,” said Mara. “On Mondays the sewing group opened up for me. On Wednesdays, the choir. On Fridays, the chess club. ‘The workshop? Not here.’ Nobody would sign for a workshop.”

I drew it while she talked, in three panels: Mara, with the box under her arm, in front of the same door, and in the doorway, by turns, a needle and thread, a musical note and a chess knight,

which said nothing because in chess you keep quiet. Underneath, the box coming in through the shop window at dawn. Nine times.

"The theatre group rehearses in the yard," said Irene. "And the yard has no doorbell."

She opened the folder and showed Mara a sheet with the centre's stamp on it. Mara read it with her nose very close, which is how she reads what she means to take seriously.

"It's in the register now: 'Theatre workshop. In charge: Irene.' Somebody does sign for a workshop."

"Now that there's somebody to sign, why doesn't Mara carry it over in her box, like Ellie's stand?" asked Julie.

"In its box I took it nine times," said Mara. "Now the conditions are set by whoever receives it."

"A folding little theatre is for taking out to the squares," said Irene. "I need to see that the kids in my group can manage it in the street. If they can't, it doesn't work for me. And I don't sign what doesn't work for me."

"I've heard that before in a bakery," said Mara.

I had had a question since I read the letter, and I asked it before it wore off.

"And why does it take three?"

I asked it for real. A bundle with two handles; two people, one on each handle. I had counted on my fingers and got two.

Nobody laughed. Irene looked at me over her glasses, the way you look at a piece that fits better than it seemed to.

"Good question. On Tuesday, in the yard, you can answer it for me."

Mara opened her book and wrote down her conditions. Mara's always fit in one hand; I counted them on mine and had a thumb to spare:

- No. 6: lent for practice.
- Goes out with Irene or me.
- Comes back folded.
- Sleeps here.

The label stays in the box, and the box stays with Mara.

If it sleeps on its shelf, at dawn it has nowhere to go back to. It stays at nine stamps. I asked. —J.



On Tuesday we went to the yard of the community centre. You go in from the pavement through an iron gate with many layers of paint, which closes by itself: you let go and it comes back, slowly, until it clicks, like a dog that sits down without being told.

Mara put the box on the ground and lifted off the lid. As it came out, the little theatre grew, like Ellie's stand. I don't get scared any more: I take out my tape.

Closed, it was a flat bundle of wooden and cloth panels, with a handle on each side and a strap that went through a buckle with three holes. A metre by seventy centimetres and, edge-on, a handspan. The gate, with one half open: ninety centimetres. Edge-on, it fitted through the gate. That was the easy part.

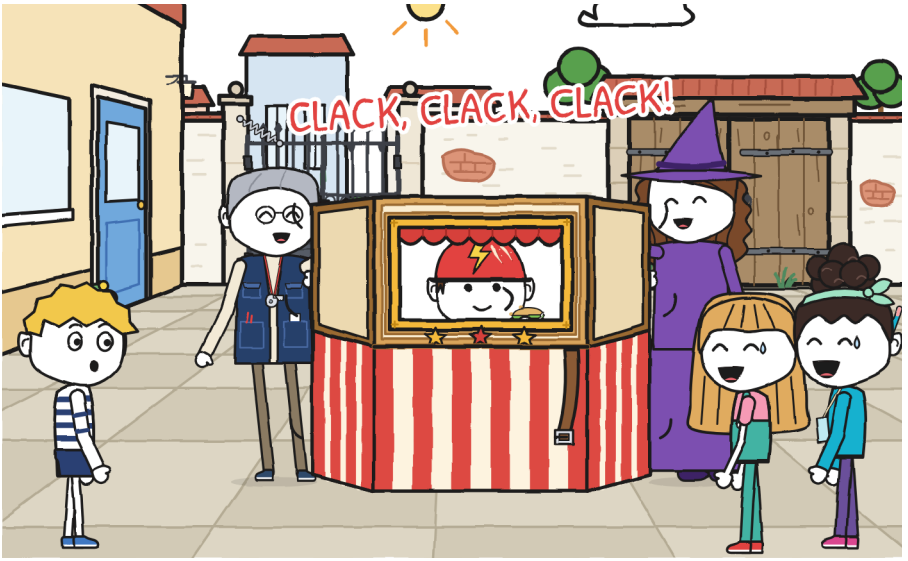
Before anything else, Irene wanted to see whether it was all there. She undid the strap and turned the bundle. The panels opened by themselves, under their own weight, one after another: clack, clack, clack. A stage with three walls, a short curtain and a framed window in the back panel.

Through the window you could see Tony, who was going along the pavement with a sandwich. His mouth was full. He couldn't say hello. He stopped for a moment, framed, with his helmet on and one cheek fatter than the other, like the portrait of someone important painted at lunchtime.

"It's all there," said Irene. "Workshop rule: hands on the handles. Never on the hinges. And on turns, someone holds the strap."

I wrote it down exactly as she said it.

Irene and Mara folded it up and fastened the strap.



“We’ll try it,” said Julie. Noa was already at the other handle.

They didn’t look at each other to decide. They didn’t even say it: each went to her own side the way you go to your usual chair.

They counted to three and lifted it. They could. They walked once round the yard, slowly, with their elbows slightly out, and the little theatre went between them without swaying, like a tray well carried. They reached the gate. The gate was closed.

Julie looked at it. Noa looked at it. They had four hands and all four were busy.

I was two metres away, with my two free and a notebook.

Irene, at the back, with the folder against her chest, said nothing. Neither “help them” nor “you”.

I held the gate with my back. They went through. Irene wrote something in the folder.



That afternoon I invented this notebook's gadget. It's the fifth of my career, after the shakeometer, the redometer, the hereometer and the noiseometer, and the first one that doesn't measure one person but several at once. I called it THE THREE-GAUGE, "who does what on each leg". One row per leg and three boxes, each with its little picture:

- CARRY: two hands on two handles.
- GUIDE: say which way and when.
- CLEAR THE WAY: doors, kerbs, people.

In the first row, "yard, first attempt", I put "Julie and Noa", "Julie and Noa" and an empty box. In the second, "yard, second attempt", the same, but in the third box I put "Gus".

Two names repeated and an empty box: it doesn't get through. With the box filled, it does. I now had the answer for Irene, and it was mine.

And I wrote down something else, smaller: "A gate can be held by a stone too."

I wrote it with the pencil hardly pressing.

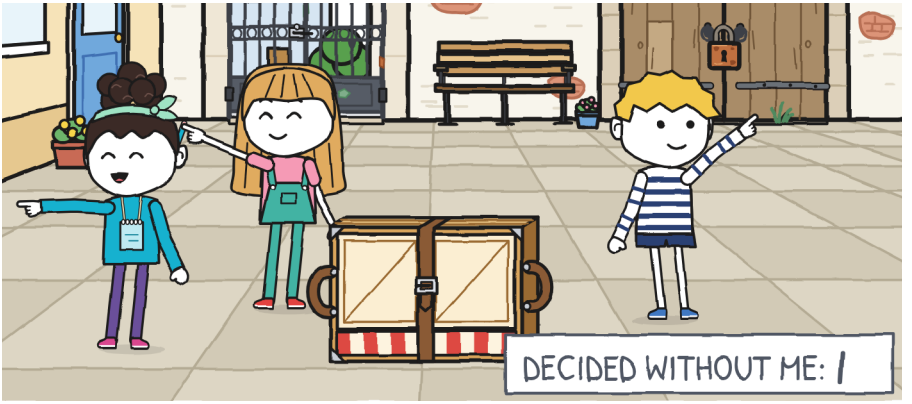
What was left was to understand the label.

"The two doors are the two halves of the gate," said Julie.

"We have to open both," said Noa.

"We could measure the wall from the outside first," I said.

We all three pointed at once. Julie, at the gate. Noa, at the workshop room. Me, at the street.



"Later," said the two of them.

They said it at the same time and to the same tune, as if they had rehearsed it. They had rehearsed it, I suppose. For years.

I went alone. I went out through the gate, which closed behind me with its click, and walked round the wall measuring with the tape, leg by leg, writing each number in the notebook propped on my knee. The wall was long and backed onto an alley that smelt of still water. And there, round the back, I found something.

I hurried back, with the thing in my head and the tape still not rolled up, dragging a metre of yellow along the pavement. When I came in, Julie and Noa were laughing about something that had

happened before I came to the neighbourhood. They laughed with their shoulders, without a sound, and Noa kept touching Julie's arm so that she would stop, and Julie didn't stop.

I opened my mouth.

"It's decided, Gus," said Julie. "It's the two halves."

In the bottom corner of the page, small and in pencil, I wrote: DECIDED WITHOUT ME. And beside it, a little tally mark. I wrote it with my mouth still open.

I shut my mouth. And the notebook.

I saw that tally mark two days later. It was mine. —J.



CHAPTER 2

Who Knows the Way?

Wednesday was the day for the first journey: from the shop to the yard, along the street, carrying the little theatre, with people looking. I had spent the afternoon lesson drawing the gauge in the margin of a worksheet, with a new row and the boxes empty, to fill in among the three of us.

When I got to the shop, the gauge was already filled in. In green.

Julie had opened my notebook at the page with the gadget and added the row in her poster lettering: "shop → yard". In the CARRY box it said "Gus and Noa". In GUIDE, "Julie". In CLEAR THE WAY, "Julie" again. The marker was still on top, uncapped, like evidence nobody has bothered to hide.

"You and Noa carry," said Julie. "I'll guide, because I know the way. And since I'm in front, I clear the way."

"We thought of it on the way here," said Noa.

She didn't say it to win. She said it the way you give directions: because it was true. They had come together from somewhere and thought on the way. On my way I had thought the same thing, but in the margin of a worksheet, and that doesn't count as coming together.

Green doesn't come off. Second tally mark.



"Before we set off we could make a plan," I said. "With the turns numbered."

I had it half done in my head: the shop door, the kerb, the shoe shop, the little square, the turns with their number inside a circle, like stations on a railway line.

"No need for a plan," said Julie. "It's straight on until the limping fish."

Noa burst out laughing. So did Julie. Not a little laugh: the kind that starts in one of them and spreads to the other before the first has finished, and comes back, and you can't tell any more who is carrying it.

"What fish?"

"The limping fish is the limping fish," said Noa, still doubled over.

"It's a long story," said Julie.

"And a very good one," said Noa.

I waited. I had my pencil in the air, ready to write the story down, in case it was any use for the route. They didn't tell me. They calmed down little by little, wiping their eyes on their sleeves, and whenever one looked at the other it came back to them a bit, like hiccups.

I lowered the pencil. Third tally mark.



Mara took the little theatre out of its box at the shop door, on the pavement, and the box stayed inside with its label and its nine stamps. Noa fastened the strap on the first hole.

"That way it comes undone sooner when we arrive."

It was a good reason. I wrote it down: "Hole 1: comes undone sooner." I didn't write down the rest, because I didn't know the rest yet.

I went in front and Noa behind, each with one hand on a handle. In front you see the street. Behind you only see little theatre: a metre of wood and painted cloth a handspan from your nose, like walking behind a wardrobe. Noa kept her other hand near the strap, out of habit or because of Irene's rule, and counted under her breath. She counted steps. From the front I could hear her: "... twenty-one, twenty-two ...", in the tone other people use for humming.

Irene came last, with the folder and the whistle. She didn't say which way. She said "stop" when there was a kerb. She said

it once and without raising her voice, and we stopped, and it was as if the whole street had stopped with us.

Julie cleared the way very well. She went a few steps ahead, walking backwards and waving her arms like someone reversing a lorry.

"Make way, there's a theatre coming through!"

The shoe shop lady came out to her door to watch, with a half-tied shoe in her hand. A man with a dog waited in a street door; the dog waited too, which is harder. Far away, on the other side of the neighbourhood, a little bell rang. Ting-a-ling.

"LIGHTNING is rehearsing its test," said Noa. "They go by bike, with an envelope. We go on foot, with this."

"You don't run with this," said Irene.

Tony had told me on Monday: at each LIGHTNING station all three have to arrive together, or it doesn't count. I wrote it down then without knowing what for.

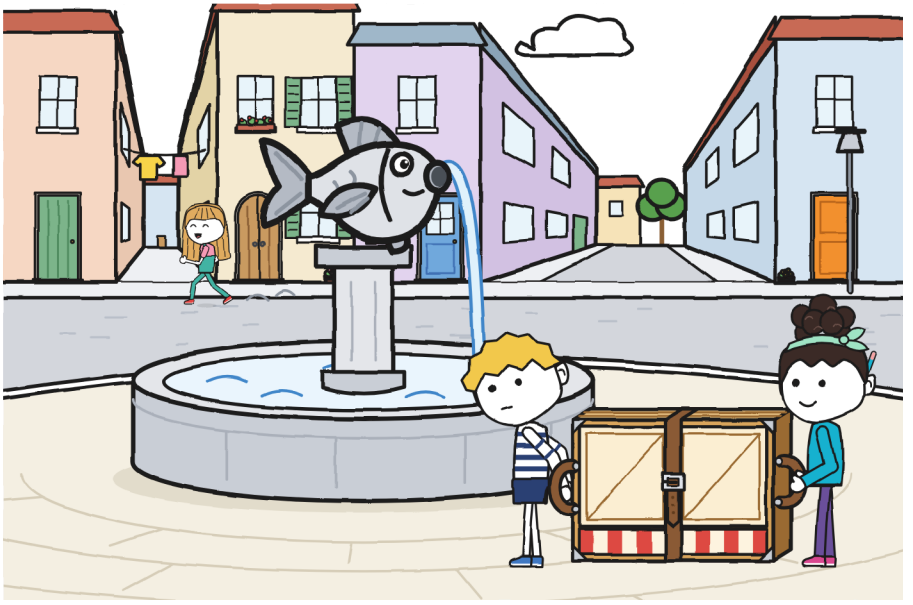


We reached the little square with the fountain. It is round, with benches all the way round and some pigeons that don't move aside for anyone. Julie turned, shouted the instruction and ran off towards the centre, to go and hold the gate.

"Up to the limping fish and turn!"

And she was gone. Her dungarees showed for a moment between two people and then nothing.

In the middle of the fountain there is a stone fish, on top of a short column, its mouth open as if it were about to say something and had thought better of it. I looked at it carefully. From my side it had all its fins.



I thought fast, which isn't my thing. My thing is thinking slowly, with a ruler. But the little theatre was heavy, Noa was behind

seeing nothing, and the street carried on walking all around us. I propped the notebook against the handle and wrote two lines:

1. Fountain fish: fins all visible. Not limping. There must be another fish.
2. Turn: which side? Left, narrow street. Right, wide street. A little theatre goes better along the wide one.

Underneath, a fat arrow pointing right. It was flawless reasoning. The only thing wrong with it was the beginning.

"Do I turn now?" I asked, backwards.

"At the limping fish!" said Noa from behind the little theatre.

Noa saw nothing but wood. From where she was, the limping fish was a word, and the word had been perfectly well said.

I carried on looking for another fish. I looked at the street doors, the signs, a fishmonger's that turned out to be an ironmonger's. There wasn't one. I turned right.



Nobody said "turn". Nobody held the strap. On the first hole, the buckle doesn't hold much.

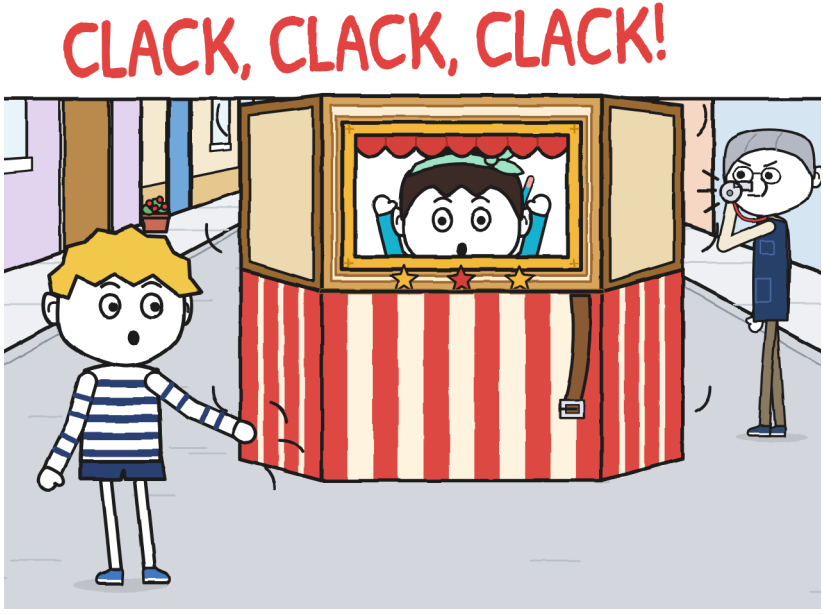
Clack. Clack. Clack.

The panels opened slowly, one after another, all round Noa, like the leaves of an artichoke somebody was opening from the inside. Irene blew the whistle. When the noise stopped, in the

middle of the street there was a theatre. And inside the theatre, Noa.

"Hello," she said through the window.

She had her hands up, away from the hinges, as she had been told. The strap hung down to the ground. I was still holding my handle, which was no longer the handle of anything: it was the edge of a stage.



Irene looked at Noa's hands. Then at mine. She looked properly, finger by finger, on both sides. They were all intact: the panels weigh little and open slowly.

"Who was guiding?" she asked.

Nobody answered. The one who was guiding was holding a gate, two streets away.

We folded it up, Irene and I, with our hands on the side rails, unhurried, panel by panel. Noa, out by now, fastened the strap, and this time she pulled it twice. Meanwhile, I measured: from my foot to the fountain, four metres. I noted it with the tape still stretched along the ground, from my shoe to the stone edge.



Julie came running back.

"But it was at the limping fish!"

"Which limping fish?"

"That one!" She pointed at the fountain. "On the left. Like always."

"'Always' is before I got here."

I didn't say it angrily. I said it the way you correct a date. Julie stayed with her arm stretched towards the fountain a second too long, and then turned to Irene, who had the folder open.

"It's just that Gus got lost."

I hadn't got lost. I knew exactly where I was: four metres from the fountain. I had just measured it.

Noa looked at one of us and then the other, with her notepad shut against her jumper. Irene wrote something down. She didn't say what.

That too was decided without me. Fourth tally mark.

I said it out loud and in front of people. I know. —J.



They showed me the other side of the fish. We went round the fountain, the three of us, with the little theatre folded between Noa and me, and Irene behind. It's missing a fin, the left one. From where you arrive along the shop's street you can't see it: the fish gives you its good side, like people posing in photographs. To see it you have to know it isn't there.

I drew it from both sides, one beside the other. The same fish, two fishes.

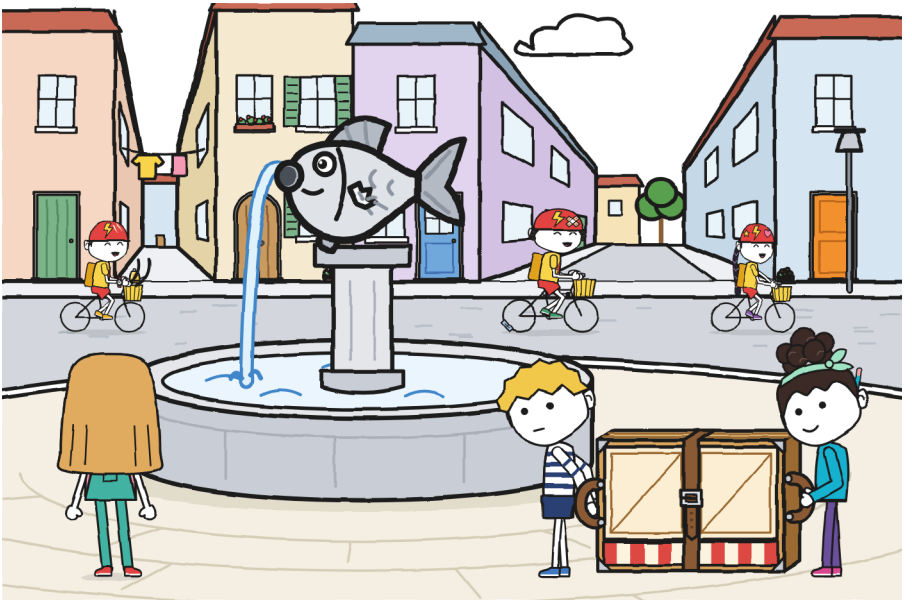
We repeated the turn. We went back a few metres, to the mouth of the street, and did it again, this time with Julie beside me. The first time I said "turn" too soon, and Noa held the strap in front of a street door, for nothing. The second time, too late: with half the little theatre already in the bend and Noa feeling blindly for the strap. The third time it came off. It came off well, without a clack. But nobody spoke. Not even Julie, who always speaks.

Then LIGHTNING went by on the road: Zoe, Bruno and Tony, in single file, with their hands on the handlebars. Ting-a-ling at

the corner. Zoe in front, her plait in the wind; Bruno in the middle, with the envelope in the basket; Tony last, with one finger on the little bell. They went round the fountain without braking and without touching, the same distance from one another the whole time, like the hands of a clock that never catch up.

"Station one, first time," said Tony as he passed.

He didn't say it for us. Tony announces his facts out loud even when there's nobody to hear them; that's what makes him LIGHTNING. But we heard.



Julie's arms were hanging down. Julie's arms are never hanging down: they go, they come, they point, they clear the way. That

afternoon, as the little bell faded, they dangled at her sides like two handles with no little theatre.

We reached the yard when it was almost dark. On the last stretch there was no need to guide: the gate was in sight. Julie held it with her hand and didn't say "make way!". Mara was waiting for us inside. She put the little theatre away in its box and took it to the shop, to sleep on its shelf.

I wrote up the day in the gauge, under the green row, and added a new column, narrow, in pencil: "opened · repeated 3 times". The three boxes had names and, even so, a theatre had opened up in the street. The gauge was missing something. I didn't know what. Next to it I drew a big question mark, the size I use when the question isn't about the neighbourhood but about the gadget.

My name is in that row twice. And I wasn't in either of them. —J.



At home, after dinner, I sat at the table with the desk lamp on and opened the notebook at the last page.

There I drew what I had found on Tuesday behind the wall. Carefully, with the ruler, with the metres I had written down propping the notebook on my knee. It came out very well. It came out so well that I looked at it for a while with the pencil still.

My mum put her head round the door to say goodnight. By then I already had my hand over the drawing. She said goodnight, looked at my hand, didn't ask, and closed the door.

I covered it with my hand even though I was alone. At one side a bit of wall peeped out, and half a padlock.

I thought: "Tomorrow they'll fail again. Then I'll take it out."

It seemed a good plan. It even had a time.

I read this page on Thursday. I didn't like it. I didn't like mine from Wednesday either. —J.



CHAPTER 3

Is Gus's Plan Any Good?

That night, when my hand got tired of covering, I made the whole plan.

The yard seen from above, the way pigeons see it. The wall measured, leg by leg, with the numbers I had written on my knee on Tuesday. The gate, with its arrow for closing by itself. The fountain, with the fish drawn from its bad side, so that it would never fool anybody again. The shop, in a corner, small. The three legs, numbered inside a circle. And, behind the wall, the thing from Tuesday.

It came out a very good plan. One of the best I've made, and I've made plenty. I looked at it for a while with the desk lamp tilted so that the pencil wouldn't cast a shadow. Then I folded it in four, pressing the creases down with my fingernail, and put it inside the notebook, between two pages that had nothing to do with it.

On Thursday, at the shop, Noa was counting.

She was on the pavement, in front of the window, walking towards the kerb with long strides, all the same, without looking at her feet. She looked ahead, where she was going, and moved her lips.

"From the door to the kerb, six steps. From the kerb to the lamp-post, eleven."

"That's measured with a tape," I said.

"I measure in steps. I always have them on."

I thought about it. It was true: the tape has to be taken out, stretched, held down with your foot, and then it rolls itself up and bites your finger. Steps you don't leave at home.

"How long is one of your steps?"

"One."

I measured one step. I stretched the tape out on the shop floor and Noa took a long step over it, one of hers, without thinking, like someone signing. I crouched to read the mark: fifty-eight centimetres. She wrote it in her notepad. I wrote it in my notebook. Both handwritings said the same: "1 Noa step = 58 cm".

"And yours?" she asked.

I didn't know. I measured myself. I took a step over the tape, a normal one, the kind you take going to school, and Noa crouched to read it, because from above I couldn't without moving my foot: fifty-one centimetres. She wrote that down too.

I had spent my whole life with steps on and had never counted them.

Julie watched us from the counter with her arms folded and one eyebrow raised, like someone watching two clocks showing the same time.

I had thought Noa would be another Julie. She isn't. Noa counts.



We went to the yard with Irene. Julie and Noa wanted to try their idea: opening both halves of the gate.

The first half opens and closes by itself: we knew that. The second wouldn't open. The two of them pulled at it, each with both hands and both feet dug into the ground, Julie red in the face and Noa counting to three out loud, and on three nothing happened. Irene crouched down to look. It has paint on top of paint, and a bolt in the ground that pins it, thick as a finger.

"Then the label's wrong," said Julie.

"Definitely," said Noa.

They decided it in two seconds. I counted. I took out my pencil for the tally mark. It would be the fifth.

I didn't make it.

The pencil stayed a finger's width from the paper. I looked at the row of tally marks, in the corner of the page: four, well made,

straight, all the same size. I had made them very carefully. And one was missing.

On Tuesday, behind the wall, I too had decided something without asking anyone: to keep quiet.

Under DECIDED WITHOUT ME, in the same handwriting and in pencil, I wrote another row: DECIDED WITHOUT THEM. And a tally mark. It came out more crooked than the others.



"The label isn't wrong," I said. It came out louder than I meant. "The yard has another door. It's at the back, in the canal alley. It's old and it has a padlock. I found it on Tuesday."

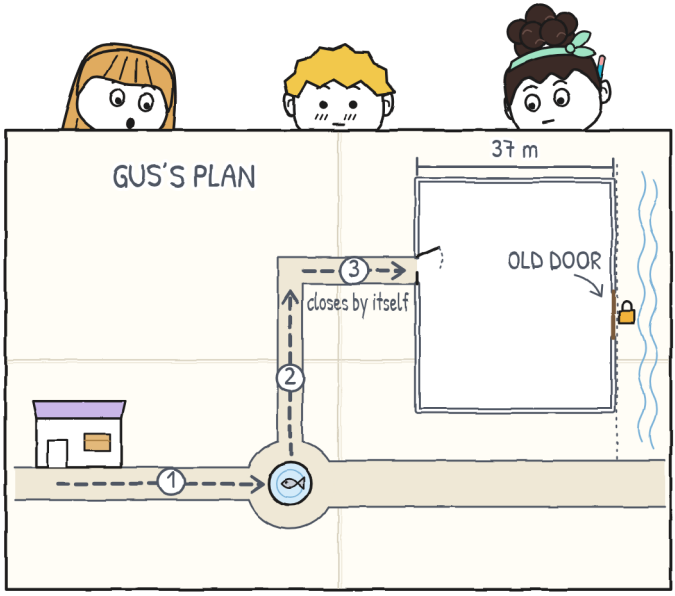
I took the plan out from between the pages and unfolded it over the folded little theatre, which was on the floor and served as a table. The creases split it into four, in a cross, like a window.

"Tuesday?" said Julie.

"Tuesday. I kept it back so I could be right later."

The three heads bent over the paper. The wall: thirty-seven metres. The gate, on one side, with its "closes by itself". And on the opposite side, a door with two halves and a padlock drawn face-on, so that you could see it properly: OLD DOOR.

Nobody said anything for a while. I measured it: it was long. You could hear the chess on the other side of the wall, one piece against a board now and then, like a clock that is in no hurry.



"All right," said Noa. And she copied the door onto her map.

She copied it with the turquoise pencil, carefully, counting the little squares of my plan with the tip to put it in its place. She asked nothing else. For Noa, a door that exists is a door you write down.

Julie didn't say "all right". She was moving one foot. Her red shoe went back and forth on the floor of the yard, tap, tap, tap, at a rhythm I know: the one for things that aren't going to be said straight away.

"That would have been very handy yesterday."

"I know."

Yesterday, with the plan in my notebook, I had measured four metres from my foot to the fountain while Noa was inside a theatre.

In the yard there is no corner. I didn't look for one either. I stayed where I was, with the plan open and both hands on top of it, so the wind wouldn't take it.

I didn't say "all right" because it wasn't true yet. —J.



The three of us went to see it, with Irene. We left through the gate, which closed behind us with its click, and went round the wall. Noa counted it, under her breath, with her lips: sixty-four steps. I already had it: thirty-seven metres. I did it in my head, sixty-four times fifty-eight, and got thirty-seven and a bit. It came out the same.

Noa looked at me when I said it. She said nothing, but she wrote "37 m" beside her steps, and I wrote "64 steps" beside my metres.

The canal alley is narrow and smells of still water. At the end you can see the railing, and behind it the canal, which goes by without looking. The old door is wooden, with two halves, as wide as a giant's bed. Noa measured it from one side to the other: three steps. I measured it: a metre seventy-five. Almost two gates. The wood has gone grey from being rained on. The padlock has more rust than padlock.

Julie touched it with one finger, just the tip, the way you touch something that might bite.

"It's been shut for years," said Irene. "I've always seen it like this."

Irene looked in the centre's register, which she carries in the folder, going through it sheet by sheet, turning the pages with a wet thumb, until she reached a yellow sheet.

"Here it is. When this door was in use, you got into the yard in two places: by the gate or by here. They called it 'the one with the two doors'. And of all the groups, only the theatre group rehearses in the yard."

On the sheet there was an old plan, in ink, of the yard with its two doors, and a heading: YARD OF THE TWO DOORS. It was like mine. Older and worse measured, but like it. I counted the doors: two. On mine, too. It was the first time that someone else's plan had agreed with me, and it had been drawn by somebody long before I knew where this neighbourhood was.

"So the label isn't a riddle," said Noa.

"It's an address," I said.

"Yard workshop. Entry by the two doors." It was well written. It was just old.

Mara said afterwards that she had seen that padlock nine times. She thought a shut door didn't count. —J.

The key was in the folder, in an envelope: "Old door. Do not lose." Irene took it out with two fingers, looked at it the way you look at someone you haven't seen for a long time, and opened the padlock. It took effort. First it wouldn't turn; then it turned all at once. The door made a noise like a ship.

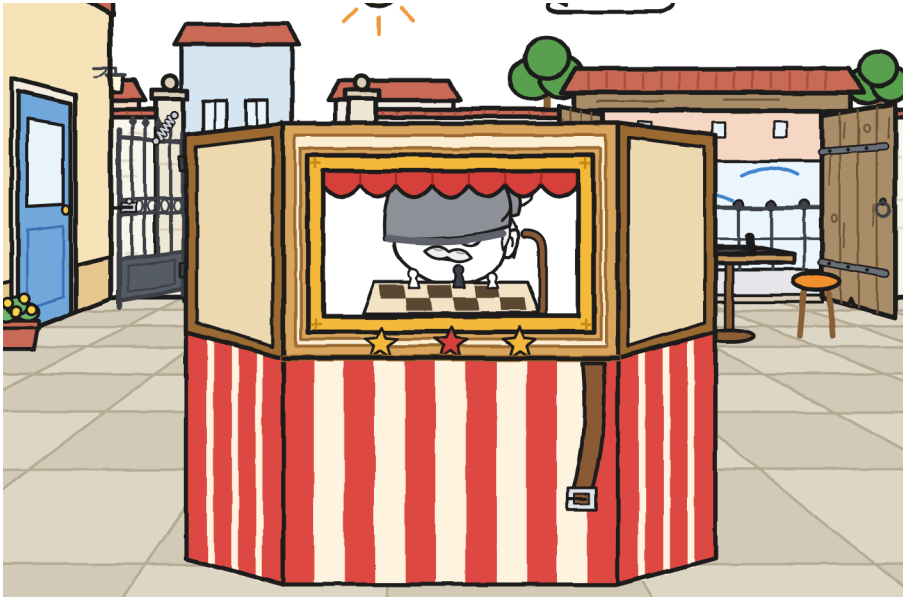
Inside, in the yard, the chess people had put their tables out in the sun. Nobody looked up. A door that has been shut for years opens beside them with a noise like a ship and the chess players don't raise their heads: that is also a way of playing.

Irene opened the little theatre in the middle, to see how much room it left between the two doors. She opened it with Noa, the two of them with their hands on the side rails. Clack, clack, clack. It left plenty.

Through the little theatre's window you could see Don Antonio, with his beret over his eyes and his stick between his knees, in front of a board. He was thinking out a move. He was snoring a little. I left him inside the frame for a while, looking at him, and didn't want to move so as not to change the picture.

"On Saturday I'll open both," said Irene. "The bikes come in by the old one, from the canal alley. The loads on foot, by the gate, from the pavement. That way they don't cross."

"But the old one is wider," said Julie. "And it doesn't close by itself."



“And the gate is yours. If the workshop takes the little theatre to a square, there will be worse doors.”

Julie opened her mouth. She held it open for a moment, with the sentence ready, and didn’t say it. She looked at Noa. She looked at me.

“What do you say?”

It was the first time all week. I wrote it down with the date: “Thursday 29. What do you say?” I wrote it before answering, so that I wouldn’t forget the question while I thought of the answer.

I said the gate, but rehearsed. Noa said the same. Julie said all right, and this time it was half true. One half more than before.

Afterwards we fixed the gauge. We put it on top of the folded little theatre, which was already our usual table even though it had only been one for two days. It had three boxes, and none of them was any use for yesterday or for mine.

We drew the new box between the three of us. I made the frame, in pencil. Julie wrote the name, in green. Noa made the little picture, in turquoise: a mouth with little lines coming out of it, like the ones that come out of a radio.

- WARN: say what you know.

In Wednesday's row, in the new box, Julie wrote: "nobody". In Tuesday's, I wrote: "Gus, no". I wrote it slowly and in my usual handwriting, neither bigger nor smaller, and I didn't rub it out.

The three-gauge has four boxes. I'm not complaining. The fourth is the one I find hardest. —J.

We went back by the fountain. It was getting towards evening, and the water had turned the colour of the notebook. I stopped in front of the fish, on its limping side. It was missing the fin just as on Wednesday, but now I knew how to look at it.

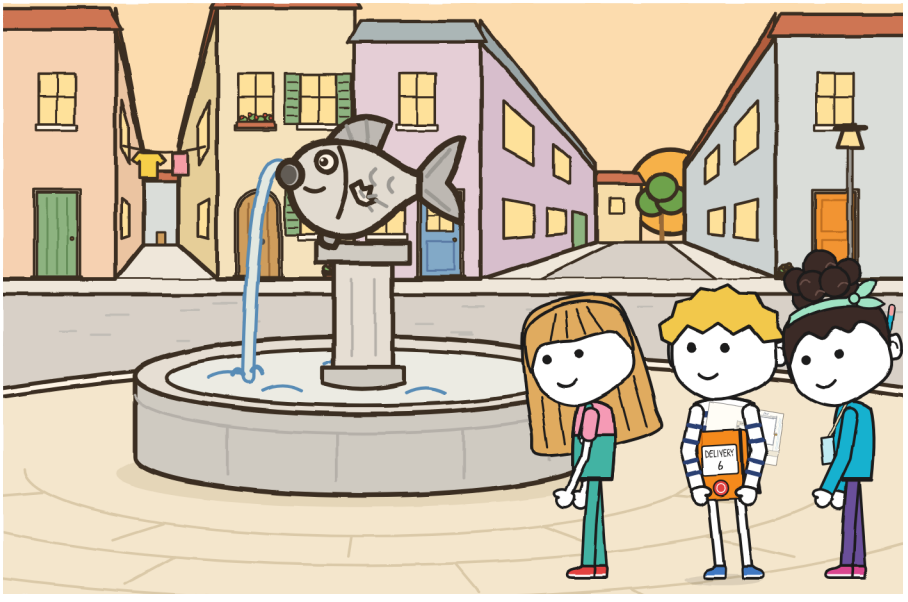
"Will you tell me the story?"

Julie and Noa looked at each other. They didn't laugh. Something showed in them, a corner of Wednesday's laugh, and they kept it, each one her own.

"It's long," said Julie.

"Saturday," said Noa. "If we make it."

It wasn't a no. I put the plan back in the notebook, this time without folding it, with half the plan sticking out.





CHAPTER 4

Can Anyone Lead?

On Friday, Tony came to the shop with his watch, a pencil and LIGHTNING's entry form clipped to a clipboard. He left it on the counter for us to see, the way you leave a trophy that hasn't been won yet.

NEIGHBOURHOOD RALLY · SATURDAY 31ST. Team: LIGHTNING. Underneath, three numbered names: Zoe, Tony, Bruno. All in the same pointed handwriting, which wasn't Tony's. No name crossed out.

"Zoe wrote it," he said. "Bruno dictated: 'Bruno, with a B.'"

"And Zoe?"

"She wrote Bruno. With a B."

I checked. The B was there, and it was very firm, the kind you write when somebody is watching your pencil.

Then he sat on his crate, the "for now" one, and set his watch to zero with a click that could be heard all through the shop.

“Today I time. I don’t give opinions. I note down what has to be repeated.”

Tony belongs to LIGHTNING and he belongs to the shop, and that afternoon he seemed to have worked out how to be both at once: on the clipboard, his team’s sheet; on his wrist, our time.



There were three ideas, one per head. Noa’s: relays. Three legs, and on each one a different person guides. Mine: that guiding and clearing the way should be the same person’s job, whoever is free, because the two who carry only see little theatre; I know because on Wednesday I was one of them and what I saw, mostly, was painted cloth. Julie’s: start now.

I said that first we had to look at the whole route, on the plan.

“We’ll look at it as we walk,” said Julie.

She won. Walking, the route gets looked at very fast.

“Who guides first?” asked Noa.

We all three pointed at once. On Tuesday we had already done it, and each of us had pointed at a different place: the gate, the room, the street. This time nobody pointed at a place. I pointed at Noa, Noa pointed at Julie and Julie pointed at me. Three arms in a ring, like the spokes of a wheel that has no intention of turning, and in the middle, on the floor, the folded little theatre. Nobody pointed at themselves.

Tony wrote it down without looking up. Irene waited at the door, with the folder against her chest, not giving an opinion either. That afternoon in the shop there were two people who gave no opinions, and a third, Mara, who never gives them aloud, so we worked out the plan by going round the ring:

1. Shop → fountain: Julie guides.
2. Fountain → corner: Gus guides.
3. Corner → yard: Noa guides.



Before lifting the little theatre, Julie said:

"One thing."

She hadn't announced it. She stood in front of me; not in front of the little theatre, nor Noa, nor the door: in front of me, with her arms pressed to her sides as if she had tied them so they wouldn't escape.

"On Wednesday I gave a direction that only Noa understood and then said you'd got lost."

She said nothing else. She didn't need to: it was all there. What had happened, who had done it and to whom. I, for the same thing, would have needed a page and, at the bottom, a note with an asterisk.

I looked at her feet. Julie's feet are made for leaving; when she talks, one of the two is already on its way somewhere else. This time both were still, together, planted on the paving slabs as

if she had parked them with the handbrake on. Behind me, Noa, already with her hand on her handle, was looking at the ground with enormous interest, so as not to disturb. Tony's pencil had stopped a centimetre from the sheet.

"All right," I said.

I learned it from Noa, on Thursday. It came out whole.

And since I can't accept anything without asking a question, I asked one:

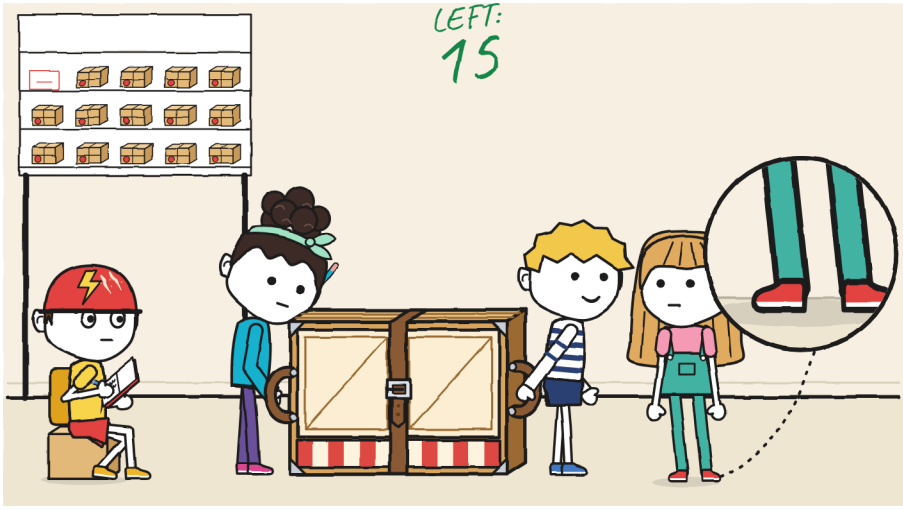
"Which side is the fish missing its fin on?"

"The left, as you arrive," answered Julie, without thinking, like someone who has studied the answer. "At the fountain, turn left. I'll warn you five steps before."

"Now that's a direction."

It had a side, a place and a warning. I copied it into the notebook exactly as it was, with its "as you arrive", which was just what Wednesday had lacked.

Both feet still. Check it in the drawing. —J.



Leg one. Noa fastened the strap on the second hole. I said that on the third it held better.

"On the third it takes longer to come undone," said Noa. "And when we arrive there's a hurry."

I said it once, out loud, and lost. The handles weighed the same.

We set off. Irene, last, ten steps behind, with the folder; Tony, on the road, with his bike in his hand and his eyes on his wrist. Julie went three steps ahead, and at the entrance to the little square she raised an arm to the left.

"Five steps... Turn left!"

"Strap!" said Noa. And she held it.

We turned round the limping fish as if we had always done it. From my side the fish still had all its fins; I had learned not to trust it. No clack.

"Leg one: six minutes," said Tony. "Repeated: nothing."



At the fountain we swapped. Julie and Noa on the handles; me, free. It was the first time in my life that I had directed something other than a pencil.

I had prepared. The night before, under the desk lamp, I had measured the narrow street on the plan: two kerbs, a street door that sticks out, a drain cover that rocks and a zebra crossing. The short route, theirs, cuts across diagonally where there are no stripes. Mine goes down the kerb, crosses on the stripes and goes up again: nine steps more and two "stops" that the other doesn't have. I had numbered it all. But a plan doesn't have ladies.

I guide like this:

"Three steps. Stop. Kerb. Up. Two steps. Stop. A lady."

The lady was coming towards us with a shopping trolley.

"Good afternoon."

She returned the greeting. I didn't lower my hand.

"The lady goes by. Four steps."

I was walking sideways, like crabs and policemen, with one hand up. A raised hand is all a traffic policeman has, and buses obey him. I had heard "stop" from Irene on Wednesday: she doesn't say which way; she says "stop" when there's a kerb. Then it struck me as very little. From the position of the one who guides it seems like a great deal: it's the only word that stops two people, a theatre and, if need be, a lady, all at once.

"Stop. Drain cover. We step on it by the edge, not the middle. Two steps."

Julie went in front, with her handle, without saying a peep. That, in Julie, is news. Her foot kept going off by itself towards the short route: it would head out diagonally, the way a hand goes to the bell of a house it knows, hang in the air for a moment, and come back to my line. She brought it back to mine. I saw her do it four times. On the fourth she pressed her lips together and didn't let go until the corner.



Noa, behind, was moving her lips. I thought she was counting steps, which is what she always does. On the road, Tony looked at his watch and then at me, and then at his watch, like someone comparing two things that don't agree.

"Stop. Corner."

We arrived. Nobody had had to go back.

"Leg two: eleven minutes," said Tony. "The slowest I've ever timed in my life. Repeated: nothing."

Eleven minutes is a lot of minutes. I didn't care. Tony wrote down the minutes; I wrote down the other thing, in small handwriting, so that it wouldn't wear out: it was the first time I had directed something and nothing had had to be repeated.

"You said 'stop' fourteen times," said Julie.

"I counted them," said Noa. "Fifteen."

So she hadn't been counting steps.

"Six were unnecessary," said Julie. "But I did them all."

"Not one was unnecessary," I said.

"Six."

Tony didn't write down who was right. He wrote down the number: "'stop': 15 (Noa counts)". Julie uncapped the marker and drew beside it, in green, a snail wearing LIGHTNING's helmet. Tony looked at it for a while. He didn't rub it out. On Tony's sheet nothing is ever rubbed out.

I didn't argue about any of them. My teeth ached from clenching them. —J.



Leg three, from the corner to the yard. Julie and I carried; Noa guided, with the rally map that Irene had handed out to all the teams.

After twenty steps she stopped, where the canal alley begins.

"It doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?"

"The map takes us in this way. To the old door. And we go in by the gate, which is on the other side."

Julie began to turn round to see it, with the whole little theatre behind the turn and nobody on the strap.

"Down," I said.

"We'll look at it for a second and carry on."

"First you put it down. Then you argue."

Julie looked at the strap, looked at me, and lowered her side. I lowered mine. The little theatre stayed on the pavement, flat and obedient, which is how it is best.

I put my plan beside her rally map, on top of the little theatre, which once again served as a table. Since Thursday I carry it unfolded, and it shows: it takes up half the notebook and sticks

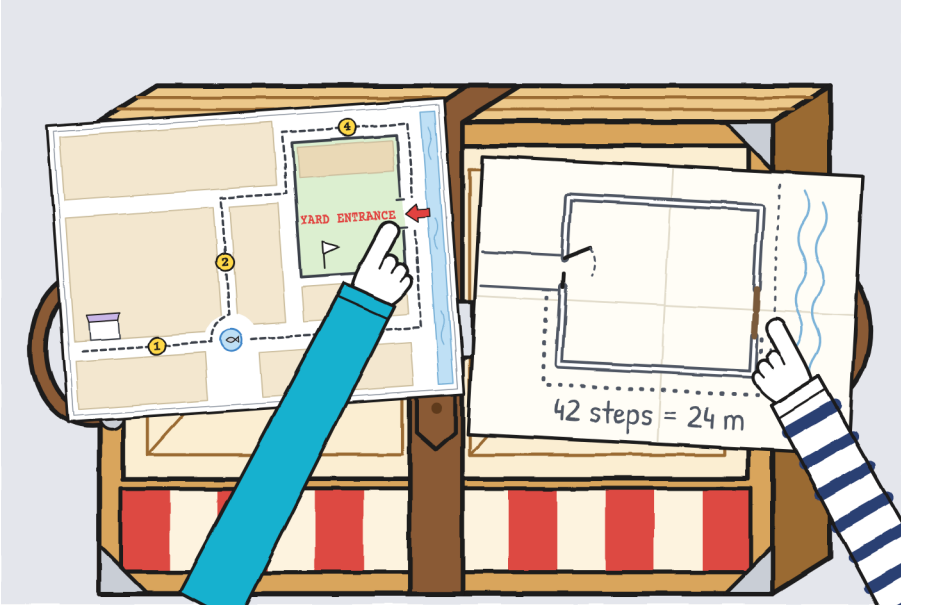
out at the top like a tongue. On the rally map there was only one entrance painted, with a red arrow, and it wasn't the gate: it was the old door. The one with the padlock. The one I found alone on Tuesday and kept quiet about for two days.

"It's an old map," I said. "From when you went in that way."

Noa put a finger on hers and I put one on mine. The same spot, on two papers.

From there to the gate it was forty-two of Noa's steps. Or twenty-four of my metres. With her step and my tape you could measure the whole neighbourhood.

"Shall we tell Irene?" asked Julie.



Irene was ten steps away, with the folder. She had heard it all, I'm sure, and was waiting for us to tell her, the way you wait for someone to finish a sentence.

"And the other teams," said Noa. "Otherwise the ones on foot will all go into the alley. With the bikes."

I pictured the alley on Saturday: five teams, each with its load, and three LIGHTNING bikes ringing their little bell in front of a door.

I said nothing. I agreed. An agreement doesn't leave a tally mark.

Irene sat on a bench in the yard with all the maps on her knees and corrected them one by one with a red marker: she crossed out the old arrow and drew two, one with a bike at the old door and the other with a bundle at the gate. Tony compared his with my plan, line by line.

"LIGHTNING was going to go in where the map said."

"You do go in there," said Irene. "For the bikes, the map was right. By chance."

Tony stayed looking at his map with the face of someone who finds out he was right without having done anything to be, which doesn't score at LIGHTNING.

We went back to the corner and repeated leg three, this time as far as the gate. Julie and I carried, and Noa guided, cleared the way and warned, all at once:

"Stop! Holding the gate! Go!"

We went through. I filled in the gauge. In the row "corner → yard" I put: Gus and Julie, Noa, Noa, and in the fourth box, "Noa: 'the map is wrong'". Each name in its own colour: pencil, green and turquoise.

It was the first row with all its boxes filled. The warning box we had invented on Thursday because of me, and Noa was the first to use it. I wrote her name in the clearest handwriting I have.

She held it with her back, like you on Tuesday. I'm writing it down. —J.



Tony showed us his sheet. At the top it said, in capitals, WHAT HAD TO BE REPEATED:

- Wednesday: the turn at the fountain, 3 times.
- Friday, leg 1: nothing.
- Leg 2: nothing (slow).
- Leg 3: the entrance. Not the team's fault: the map's.

And at the bottom, underlined twice: "What is repeated most is not the steps. It is the directions."

"That last bit is an opinion," said Julie.

“It’s a fact,” said Tony. “At LIGHTNING, a direction said wrong gets paid for twice: on the way there and on the way back.”

He put his helmet on and went off to rehearse his own stuff. At the first corner, ting-a-ling.



In the evening, at the shop, Mara put the little theatre away in its box, and the box went back to being a box like all the others. Before the lid came down, Noa looked at the buckle.

“Tomorrow, on the third hole. Even if it takes longer to come undone.”

She said it looking at the buckle, not at me. It was what I had said before we set out. I didn’t write it down under wins: she had decided it herself, in her own time, and that goes in another column.

I opened the notebook at the corner of the tally marks: the four DECIDED WITHOUT ME and, beneath, mine. Today I hadn’t made one. I went over the day with the pencil in the air, the way you go over a bill before accepting it. I counted four disagreements. All four I said out loud. I won one.

Friday. Disagreements: 4. Said: 4. Won: 1.

On its shelf, the box of No. 6 still had its nine stamps. Nine. Not one more.

The one you won was the one about putting the little theatre on the ground before arguing. I'm giving you that one. —J.



CHAPTER 5

Does It Matter Who Arrives First?

On Saturday I put on my orange Saturday T-shirt. It isn't superstition: things happen on Saturdays, and I prefer to dress the same every time so that I can compare them.

"You match the notebook," said Julie.

I held the notebook against the T-shirt to check. She was right, within a margin of one shade.

At eleven, the yard had both doors open for the first time in many years, and people were coming in through both: the bikes by the old one, from the canal alley; those on foot by the gate, from the pavement. The old door, wide open, looked more surprised than anybody. There was bunting from wall to wall and a table with a sign that said FINISH. Flora sat in the front row with her flask, like someone who has come to watch a parade go by and plans to stay for the fireworks. The shoe shop lady stood with her arms folded. Vera, with Crumb in her arms; Crumb, with

her head turning towards everything that moved, which that morning was everything. On top of the wall, a magpie. Nobody had invited it.

Irene stood on a bench and blew her whistle. A playground silence fell, which is a silence with a lot of noise underneath.

"Each team brings its load here, passing through all the stations. You don't run with a load. Whoever runs repeats the leg. And whoever doesn't repeat gains time."

I wrote it down word for word. It was the first time a rule of a game had seemed to me written for me.



On the list there were five teams, pinned to a cork board with drawing pins:

1. LIGHTNING (Zoe, Tony, Bruno)
2. THE CHOIR
3. CHECK
4. THE NEEDLES
5. NOA + 2

LIGHTNING carried an envelope, by bike. The choir, a music stand. The chess lot, a giant board. The sewing group, a headless dummy. Ours had been put down by Noa on Monday, before she met me.

"We're 'Noa + 2'," I said to Julie.

"I'm the 2," she said. "You'll be the plus."

I looked at the little cross between the name and the number. It had never been a sign. I wrote it down as a post.

Each team set off from the door where its load slept. Don Antonio started us off, as he lives nearby and doesn't run.



At the shop door, Mara took the little theatre out of its box, and the little theatre grew to its street size. Noa fastened the strap quickly and we lifted it.

Clack. A panel opened a handspan, like a mouth remembering something.

"Down," I said.

Nobody argued. The three of us lowered it at once, slowly, as if there were an egg inside. The second time, Noa fastened the strap without hurrying, on the third hole, and pulled it twice to test it. I looked at the buckle and then at the street. Both were fine.

Don Antonio took off his beret and brought it down sharply, which served as a flag.

"Calmly," he said, "is how you get there."

Mara brought up the rear, with the empty box under her arm. With nothing inside it looked bigger.



Leg one. Julie guided.

“Five steps… Turn left!”

“Strap!”

We were turning slowly round the limping fish, taking up the whole corner, when Zoe arrived on her bike. She was first of all. She braked and put a foot on the ground.

“You go ahead. You don’t run with that.”

She waited until we were out of the bend. Then she went. We were ahead of her for twenty seconds. She timed it herself.

She stopped dead. Her plait took a little longer. –J.

At each station they stamped a card. The bakery’s was run by Ellie, who stamped with a thumb full of flour and pressed as if the card were dough and had to be left to rest. On ours she left three white prints, one per head, even though we arrived when LIGHTNING’s flour had already dried.

LIGHTNING went past us three times, each time by a different street. From behind a little theatre, LIGHTNING looked like a cuckoo clock: it came out, chimed and went back in. Tony had both hands on the handlebars and rang the little bell at the corners. Bruno carried the envelope. Zoe went in front and waited at each station, without touching the card until all three of them were there. The second time they went past, Tony didn’t look at his watch: he looked at us. It was the closest thing to an opinion I saw from him all day.

On leg two, Julie and Noa carried, and I guided. The choir overtook us, with their music stand. Running. Irene's whistle sounded, for she was everywhere at once, and the choir went back to the fountain singing softly, which is how you sing when you have to repeat a leg.

The chess lot overtook us, with the board on its edge and the pieces in a bag that sounded like hail. Even the dummy overtook us, lying flat, carried by three from the sewing group who walked on tiptoe, as if the dummy were asleep. Being overtaken by a headless dummy is an experience I don't know how to measure, and I tried.

Julie didn't run. Well: one foot got away. She brought it back.

"Does it matter who gets there first?" she asked.

"The label doesn't say 'first'," said Noa. "It says 'folded'."

"Kerb," I said.

We got it up.

The choir repeated the leg singing. On the way back they were more in tune. —J.



Leg three. Noa guided as far as the gate. There we put the little theatre on the ground.

"Who opens?" asked Julie. And she waited for the answer.

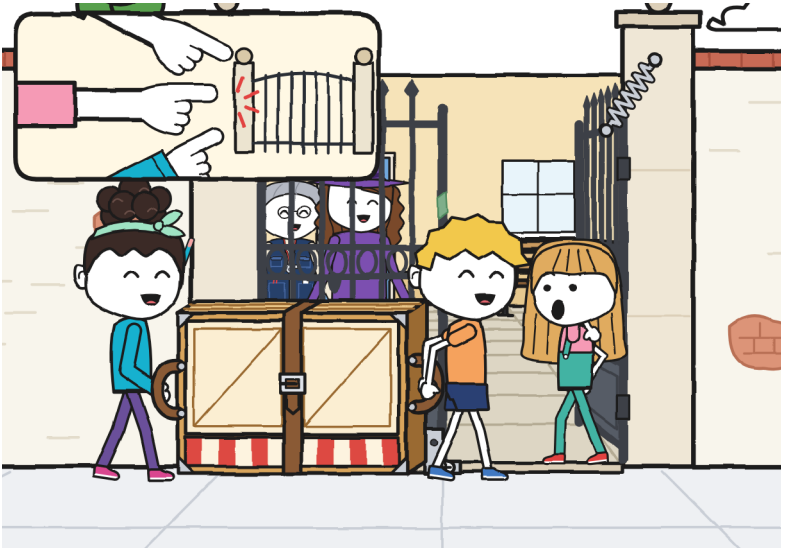
We all pointed at once. It was the third time that week. On Tuesday, each of us had pointed at a place. On Friday, each at another person. This time, all three at the same spot: Noa pointed at the gate, Julie pointed at the gate and I pointed at the gate. Then we laughed, because that's no way to decide who. Three arms pointing at a door are a very firm opinion about the door and none about us.

"You," said Noa and I.

Noa moved to her handle. Julie held the gate with her back and both hands, feet firmly planted, and for once neither of them went anywhere.

"Stop! Holding the gate! Go through!"

We went through. Folded. Whole.



“Forty-one minutes,” said Irene.

LIGHTNING had taken fourteen. The three of them were sitting on the ground, next to the bikes, without a bead of sweat. Zoe greeted me with two fingers; Bruno, with his whole hand.

Mara came with the box under her arm. Irene looked at the little theatre on the floor of her yard, folded, with the strap in place, and looked at it for a good while, from top to bottom, the way you look at someone arriving from a long journey to check that they’ve come whole. She opened the folder and showed Mara the register sheet: “Theatre workshop. In charge: Irene.” Mara read it the way she reads, with her finger, first the line and then the stamp. Julie gave her the green marker, the one that doesn’t rub out.

“It works for me,” said Irene. And she signed on the label.

The word DELIVERED appeared on the label. Nobody had written it. Around it were still the nine RETURNED stamps, one for each of Mara’s trips, and in the middle, now, a green signature that wasn’t going anywhere.



Irene opened the centre’s inventory to note down the little theatre. There was no need: it already had its page. At the top it said FOLDING LITTLE THEATRE · pending receipt, and underneath, in a box that said TESTS, there was an old line, crooked, in very bad handwriting:

"Tested in the yard. Folded, it goes through both doors. Open, it doesn't. —R."

We leaned over it, the three of us, so far that our heads cast a shadow on it.

"It's from before I ran the workshop," said Irene. "I don't know who it is."

"Neither do we," said Julie. "But we're finding things out."

R. had been in that yard and had tested the little theatre before sending it. This time R. had measured the two doors: the gate and the old one. What R. knew fitted in one line. It had taken us a week.

Ellie's door. The two in the yard. Measures doors. I'm keeping it for the record card. —J.



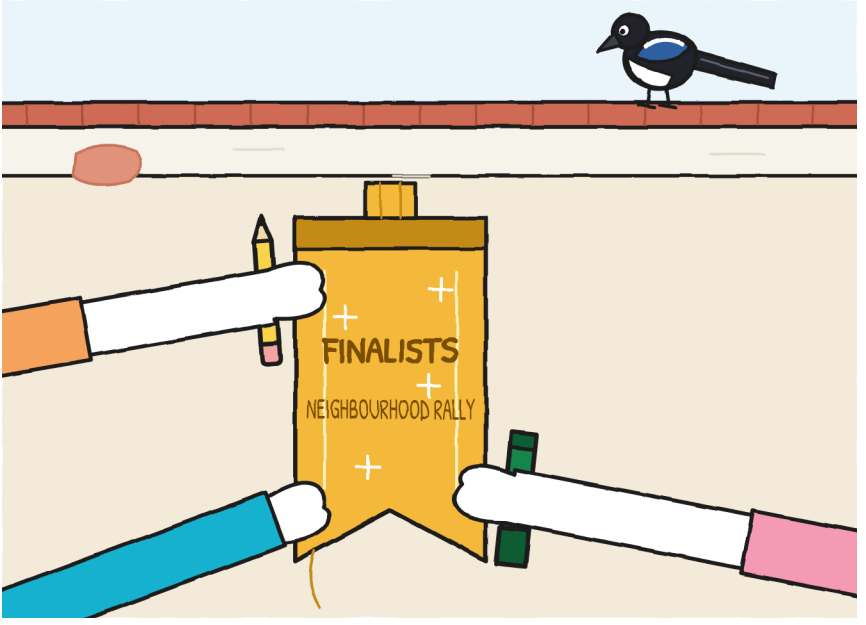
LIGHTNING won, without repeating a single leg. The prize was a loaf from Ellie with a 1 in flour on top. Zoe split it into three pieces. Bruno's was exactly as big as hers; I measured it by eye, and my eye, where pieces are concerned, doesn't get it wrong.

The teams that arrived with their load whole were given a ribbon by Irene. I saw ours up close because the three of us were holding it: one hand with a pencil, one with a green marker and one with a turquoise sleeve. It was gold satin, with sparkles that moved about when you breathed near them, a short knot at the top and an edge that was already coming loose in one thread. It

said, in letters you could read from far away: FINALISTS · NEIGHBOURHOOD RALLY.

On the wall, the magpie tilted its head. It's what I do in front of a map I don't understand.

"A finalist is the one who comes last," said Julie.



"It's the one who gets to the final," said Noa.

"We got to the final last," I said. "It works for both."

"Since it's here," said Irene, "it needs its première."

The two of them opened it, Mara and she, with their hands on the side rails. Clack, clack, clack. It was the first time all week that I had heard it open on purpose, and it sounded the same: apparently the little theatre doesn't mind.

We, behind it. We had two minutes to invent a play. Noa handed out the parts. First she asked:

"Who wants to say very little?"

I raised my hand. It was the fastest hand of the whole rally.

Crumb got loose from Vera, flew a metre and landed on top of a panel, very stiff, with her tail hanging right in front of the window. That week, through that frame we had seen Tony with his mouth full, Noa in the middle of the street and Don Antonio asleep in front of a board. Now, Crumb's tail. The frame has an unfailing eye for whatever shouldn't be there. It was the play and it hadn't even started.

Vera picked her up with her arms stretched out, and Crumb let herself be, with the "it wasn't me" face she copied from me on the first day.



The play was called "The Package That Wouldn't Go In". Julie played Mara, with a paper cone for a hat. Noa played all the doors, and each one came out different just by changing which foot she stood on. I played the package, looking out of the window.

“The workshop?” Noa would say. “Here, sewing.”

“RETURNED,” I would say.

“The workshop? Here, choir.”

“RETURNED.”

I said it nine times. The audience counted them, and the choir, who had come for that very purpose, counted them in tune. The tenth time, Noa opened her arms, and I said the other word.

To take our bow, the three of us leaned out of the window. We fitted. Squeezed in. My left ear belonged to Julie, and my right to Noa’s bun. Below, Mara, the one with the real hat, applauded with two fingers.



A spot isn’t divided into pieces. You squeeze up. —J.



CHAPTER 6

What Remains When the Test Is Over?

In the afternoon we went back to the shop with the label. Noa came too. She stayed at the door, with her notepad hanging, counting the packages on the shelf with her finger and her lips, without a voice.

Julie looked at the sign. Then she looked at Mara.

"Can I?"

"It's your sign."

She climbed onto the blue stool, crossed out the 15 and wrote, big, 14. Mara stuck the label in her book, with the other five, and ran her hand over it twice, the way you smooth a sheet.

At the door, Noa finished counting.

"Fourteen," she said, to nobody.

"Fourteen," said Julie from the stool, with the marker still uncapped.

Tony brought the results table, with the community centre's stamp, for me to copy into the notebook: LIGHTNING, fourteen minutes; CHECK, twenty-nine; THE NEEDLES, thirty-three; THE CHOIR, thirty-eight, with one leg repeated; NOA + 2, forty-one. I looked at it twice. "Bruno" was whole, not crossed out and with nothing on top. Our team Noa fixed with her turquoise pencil, without anyone asking: she crossed out the "+ 2" and wrote over it NOA, JULIE AND GUS.

"On Monday I didn't know what you two were called," she said. "Well. What Gus was called."

I took out R.'s record card. It had eleven clues. I added one: "12. Tested the little theatre in the centre's yard before sending it. It's in the inventory." Tony read it. He also read his own, further down, PENDING: owes me an explanation, and ran his finger underneath it, without touching the ink. He crossed nothing out.

"R. tested the little theatre," he said. "My little bell, R. didn't test."

"We don't know that," said Julie.

"There's no line about my little bell in any inventory," said Tony. And that was true too.



Then I spread the plan out on the counter. Well: it wasn't folded any more. Since Thursday it had travelled open inside the

notebook, sticking out at the top, but it had the marks of the creases, in a cross, like a window, and those don't go away. A plan remembers how it has been kept.

I held it down with the tape measure on one corner and the pencil pot on the other.

"It's missing your part," I told Noa. "What there is from the fountain onwards. Of those streets I only know the metres."

I hadn't rehearsed that sentence. I had thought it, which is different: during the play, leaning out of the window, between the sixth RETURNED and the seventh.

Noa looked at Julie. Julie looked at the ceiling, which is her way of staying out of it, and looked at it with an interest the shop ceiling has never earned.

"Can I draw on it?"

"That's why I'm showing it to you."

I pushed the plan towards her with both hands. Noa took the pencil from behind her ear and held it for a moment in the air, not touching the paper, the way a hand stays before knocking at a door that isn't yours. Then she lowered it.

It was the first time another pencil had touched that paper. Every time the turquoise point came down, I pressed the tape measure a little harder against its corner, although the plan had no intention of going anywhere. Julie noticed and said nothing, which, in Julie, is a very noisy way of noticing.

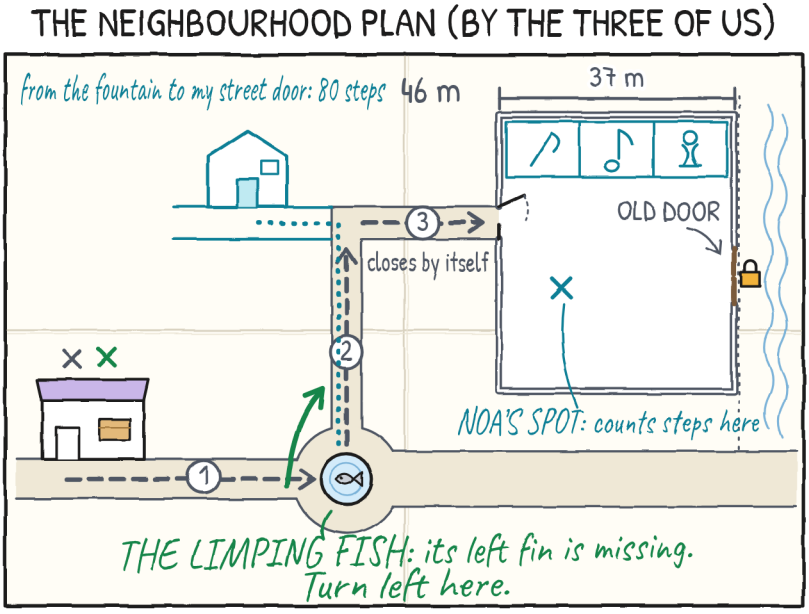
She added her street, the centre inside, with the room, the yard and the passage joining them, and the distances, in steps. She writes small and upright, as if every letter had to fit on a paving slab. I put the metres beside them. "From the fountain to my street door: 80 steps," she wrote, and I, beside it: "46 m". Eighty times fifty-eight makes forty-six metres forty. I rounded down, to be polite. On my plan there were, for the first time, two units, and neither was wrong. In the yard, Noa marked a little turquoise cross: "NOA'S SPOT: counts steps here".

Julie couldn't stand it any more. She uncapped the marker and wrote beside the fountain, in green and without asking permission: "THE LIMPING FISH: its left fin is missing. Turn left here". In the shop we put two little crosses, one in pencil and one in green, so close together that they touched.

At the top, the plan was called GUS'S PLAN. Underneath I wrote the new name: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN (BY THE THREE OF US). The brackets were my idea. Brackets are what I do best.

And while they drew, they told me the story of the limping fish. They both told it at once, one on each side of the counter, and I went from one to the other with my head, the way you watch a match from the net. It's long. It isn't as good as they say. But now I know it.

It's brilliant. It's just that we told it badly: we talked over each other. —J.



Julie had had the ribbon tied to her wrist since midday. Three threads had already come loose. I counted them because she was counting them too, under her breath, each time one snagged on the pocket of her dungarees.

"If I keep it, by Monday it's a fringe," she said. "Shall we keep it in the notebook?"

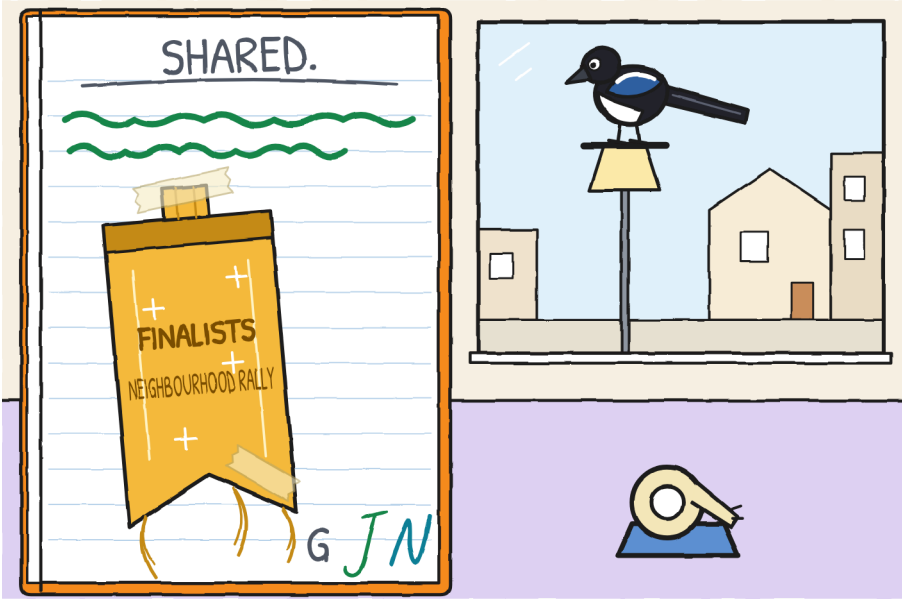
We stuck it on the first page, beneath SHARED and the green writing that takes up half the sheet, with a piece of sticky tape at each end. Noa held one end, Julie the other, and I put the two pieces on, straight. The knot ended up at the top, a bit lumpy; the sparkle moved about each time somebody turned the page

beside it. In one corner we put three small initials: G, in pencil; J, in green; N, in turquoise.

I closed the notebook to test it. It closed worse: the knot made a lump and the cover stayed a little raised at one corner, like someone who hasn't quite finished leaving. I wrote "defect" in the margin and then rubbed it out.

I drew it with its loose threads. If it comes apart, it comes apart: I'm not going to draw it newer than it is.

Through the glass, the magpie from the wall was watching us from the lamp-post. It was looking at the ribbon, not at us. I noticed because, in its place, I would have looked at the same thing.



My notebook doesn't close as well as yours. That's why. —J.



Noa turned the pages backwards. First she asked permission, with her hand open above the notebook, not touching it, and I said yes with my head. She turned them slowly, one by one, skipping none: Tuesday's gauge, Wednesday's green row, the last page with its bit of wall and half a padlock, Thursday's new box. She reached the corner of the tally marks.

"And this?"

My hand was at exactly the distance to cover it. I didn't move it.

"A count I was keeping wrong."

"And this one?" She read it out: "'A gate can be held by a stone too.'"

"I thought of it on Tuesday."

Julie stopped swinging her leg against the stool. Tony, from his crate, looked up from his watch, which wasn't timing anything.

"A stone doesn't say 'kerb'," said Noa. "Or 'stop' fifteen times."

She said it the way she says things, counting. Then she turned the page forwards, back to the ribbon, like someone putting a book back where she found it.

I didn't rub out the tally marks. In pencil you can, but I didn't want to. Underneath the sentence I drew a small stone, with a speech bubble. I left it empty.

Don't rub them out. They're a bit mine. —J.



On Sunday, at dawn, Noa kept watch, since she lives opposite the centre. At nine she brought a note to the shop. She came counting steps; you could tell from her lips. It was folded in three equal parts; I checked. It said, in turquoise, in small upright handwriting:

- 7:38: the little theatre, in the workshop, folded.
- 7:44: dawn breaks. It isn't moving.
- 7:50: still there. Steps it has taken: zero. —Noa

She keeps better watch than I do, counts better than I do and doesn't bake. Two out of three. —J.

Mara raised the shutter halfway to let us through, and I drew the shelf: fourteen packages and six gaps, in a row, from 1 to 6, like teeth falling out in order. The sign didn't need touching.

"Six," said Mara. And she closed her book.

Tony was on his crate, with his helmet on, even though it was Sunday. Noa stood by the door. Nobody told her to sit down or to leave. She had come because she wanted to, and on Monday she has rehearsal.

To finish the notebook I drew the little theatre's window, empty.

I did it with a ruler: the frame, the short curtain gathered to one side, the wood with its grain. Inside, nothing. It was the first window of the week that nobody went past by chance, and it seemed only fair to leave it like that for a moment, the way you leave a door open when you hear someone on the stairs.

I drew myself first, in pencil, at one side, which is where I stand in photos. Drawing yourself is the hardest thing there is: you can't measure from outside. I came out serious and with my hair neat, which isn't how I wear it but how I would like to wear it. I didn't correct it. I left plenty of room.

Then I left the notebook open on the counter, facing them, with the pencil lying across it. I didn't say what for. Mara, behind, didn't look: she started lining up the ink bottles with an attention they didn't need.

Noa asked permission before drawing in my notebook. Julie didn't.

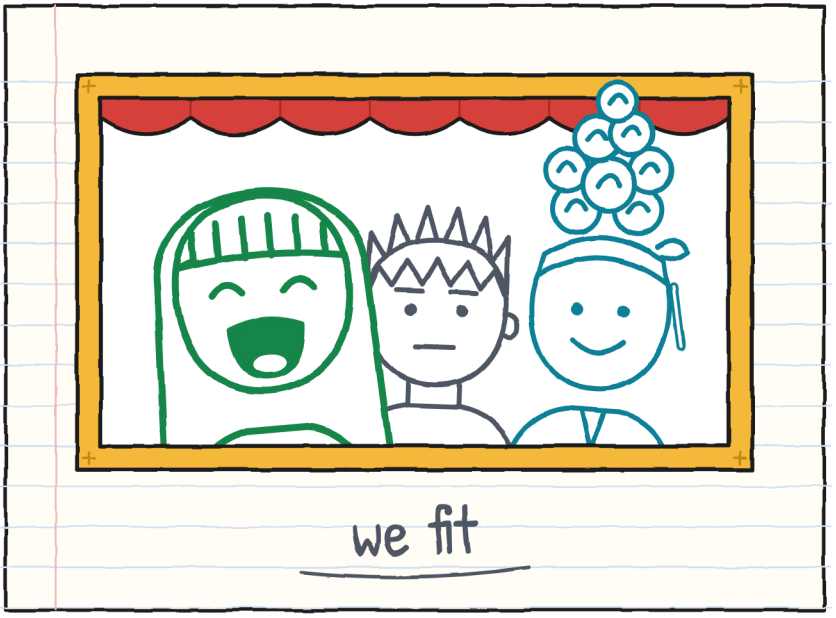
Julie drew herself in green, with her mouth open and bigger than the other two, because, she said, in real life she takes up more space too. Noa measured the space left with two fingers,

the way she measures small things, and drew herself inside it, in turquoise. Her bun stuck out of the frame at the top. She didn't correct it. Frames are too small for Noa at the top, and she knows it.

We had fitted into the real window, on Saturday, squeezed. In the paper one, which I had drawn with room to spare, we squeezed together just the same. Nobody used the spare room.

Underneath, in pencil, I wrote one word:

we fit.



Shared is shared. It says so on the first page. —J.

That left the table, which closes all my notebooks. This time I did it leg by leg, which is how the whole week has been measured.

DELIVERY NO. 6. Leg by leg (who carried · who guided · what had to be repeated):

- Shop → limping fish fountain: Gus and Noa · Julie · the turn at the fountain (three times).
- Fountain → corner: Julie and Noa · Gus · nothing (but slowly).
- Corner → yard: Gus and Julie · Noa · the entrance: the map was old.
- Saturday: all three · all three, in turns · the strap (second time, on the third hole).
- Before us: Mara, alone · nobody · nine trips.
- R.: ? · ? · we don't know.

At the bottom I drew the three-gauge, with its four boxes filled and the three names moved round.

Three boxes. Well, four. Three names. None empty. —J.

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 7

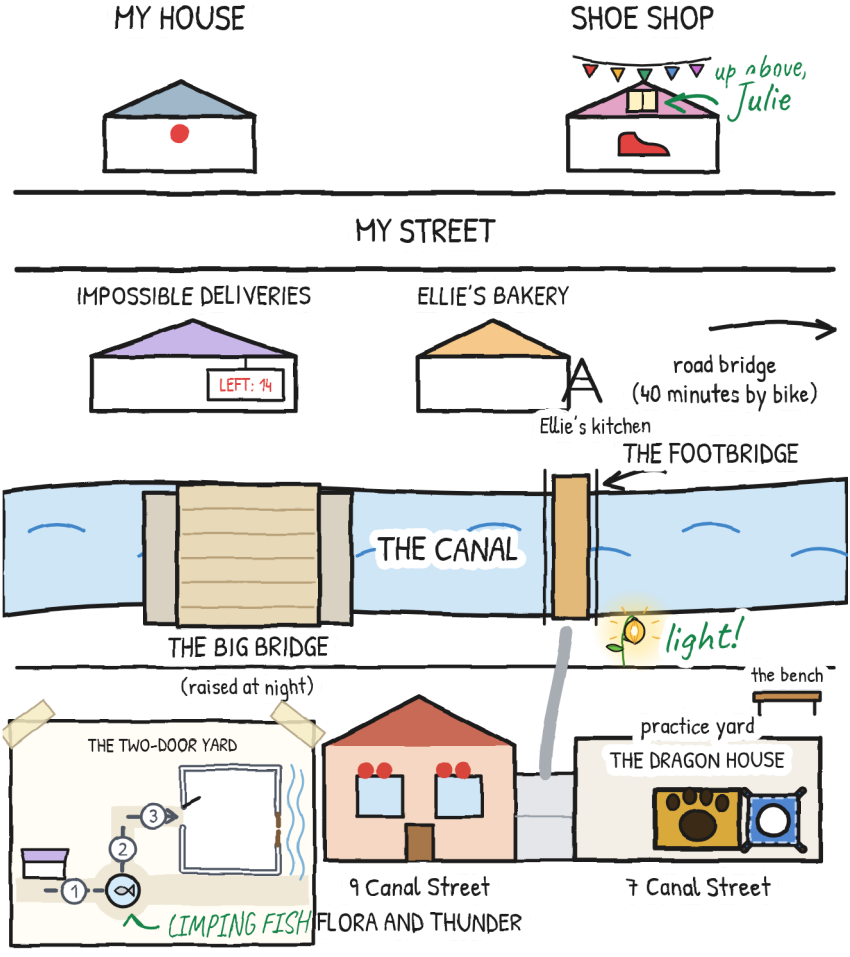
(coming soon)



This time the label asked for an hour when I'm already in my pyjamas.

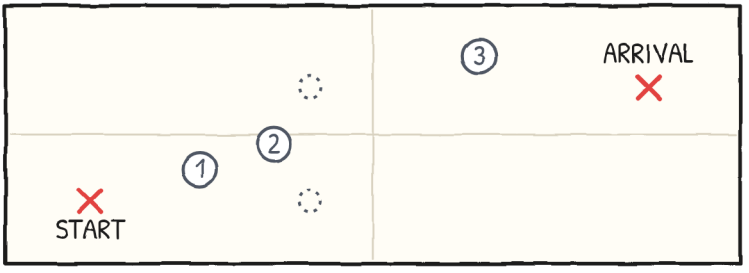
Who's awake when everyone else closes? Apart from me. —J.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD (version 6)



YOUR JOURNEY

Who carries? Who guides? Who clears the way? Who warns?



THE THREE-GAUGE

	CARRY	GUIDE	CLEAR THE WAY	WARN
leg 1				
leg 2				
leg 3				

If the same name always comes up in one box, change it. —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.

Each in their own size. The same little theatre. —J.

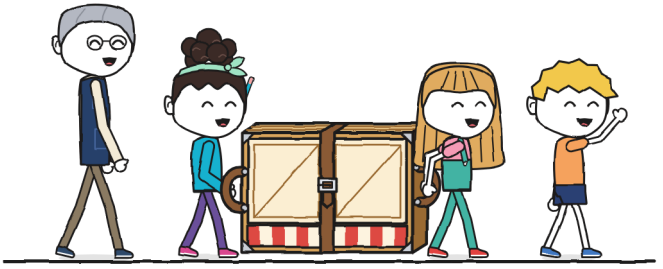
FOR FAMILIES AND TEACHERS

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

A REAL TRANSFER: WHAT TO DO

1. Before setting off, look at the whole route.
2. One person goes free: opens doors and warns.
3. Hands on the handles. Away from hinges and fastenings.
4. You don't run or race with a load.
5. If anyone says "stop", everyone stops.
6. First put it on the ground; then argue.
7. Anything big is opened and folded by two people, with a grown-up.

The ONLY IN THE STORY stamp marks what can happen in a story, but not in a real transfer.



And if you know something about the way, say it beforehand. –J.