

I walk the perimeter, tracing the fence with my gloved fingers. There's one place where the paint is chipped, and the iron underneath has rusted into a reddish curl. It looks like a secret letter. A letter only the cold understands.

The teacher calls out when someone falls. She doesn't call me. I am not the falling type. I am the walking-in-circles type. The finding-small-things-on-the-ground type. I find a button. Pale blue, like someone's eye. I slip it into my pocket.

I learn the rules of school slowly. Raise your hand before speaking. Don't read ahead in the book. Don't talk to the boy with scabs on his knuckles, his name is Pascal, and he knocks things over and throws things at people. Always say 'present' when your name is called, even if you feel absent. Don't ask the teacher why the sun moves. Never say you have already read the story they assigned. Never say you know a different ending. Never say it was better.

I like library hours best. The shelves go all the way up. The room smells like paste and paper and something else which I can't quite name. The librarian has hair like whipped cream and eyes that dart. She doesn't smile much, but she knows how to find the right book just by looking at your shoes.

She gives me a book about a fox who lives on a mountain. He doesn't speak, but everyone understands him. I like him immediately. I hide the book inside my coat and pretend the fox is whispering to me as I walk home.

Papa reads the paper in the evenings. Same chair. Same storm of crinkling pages. I tell him I read a book with a fox. I say the fox doesn't talk, but everyone understands him anyway.

Papa lowers the paper a quarter of an inch. Just enough to blink at me once.

‘Animals don’t talk,’ he says, and the paper goes up again. The sound it makes is like a door closing.

At night, I tell François the rabbit all about school. I tell him about the mismatched socks, and the gummy bear, and the boy who growled when the teacher touched his shoulder. I tell him about the button in my pocket.

François listens. He always does. He never folds himself into a rectangle and disappears.

One day at school, I cry. Not loudly. Just a little. In the cubicle after someone took my red pencil and snapped it in half. It was my favourite. Not because it was red, but because it was the only one with the gold foil letters still shiny.

The crying feels hot and sharp in my chest. It doesn’t spill out much. Just enough to remind me I’m not made of stone.

When I get home, I say nothing. Maman kisses my cheek and says I look pale. I nod. She asks if I made any friends. I say I’m still watching.

She laughs. ‘That’s very French of you.’ I don’t know what she means.

On Tuesday, the girl with the mismatched socks shows me her drawing. It’s a bear in a spaceship, holding a flower. I tell her the flower looks lonely.

She looks at me for a second, then nods. ‘Yeah. Maybe I’ll draw a second flower.’

I smile. She doesn’t smile back, but her ears turn pink.

I learn to read upside-down because I watch the teacher’s notes on the desk when she thinks we’re not looking. She writes “Étienne is observant” and underlines it twice. Then she writes “distant” and forgets to cross her t’s.

I wonder if she thinks I'm far away. I want to tell her I'm not. I'm just inside. Looking out.

One Thursday, someone brings a harmonica to class. The sound it makes is wobbly and a little broken, but I like it.

At recess, I sit on the steps and hum the notes back to myself. The girl with the spaceship bear sits beside me. She doesn't say anything, just starts drawing again. We sit like that until the bell rings. I think maybe that counts as a friend. Maybe.

At night, I open the fox book again. Even though I've read it five times.

I like the part where the fox curls up alone in the snow, and the wind wraps around him like a scarf. He doesn't cry. He just watches the stars. He knows they're not far. Just quiet. I understand that. I understand that very much.

The girl sits next to me more often now. Not every day. Not always. Just enough. She doesn't speak much. But when she does, her words land like pebbles dropped into water. Gentle. Then gone.

Sometimes she lets me use her blue crayon, which is stubby and wrapped in tape. In return, I give her the green one. Not the best green, the better green I keep at home, but the almost-good one. The one that still has a tip.

We draw on the backs of worksheets. Mostly animals. She draws foxes now too. Mine wears a scarf. Hers wears a crown. Once, I look at her paper too long, and she pulls it toward herself. I think I've broken something. But the next day, she gives me a sticker shaped like a moon.

There's a boy who smells like wet wool and glue. His name is Gabriel, and he talks in one long sound. Like a drawer opening and never closing. He tells me I blink too slowly.