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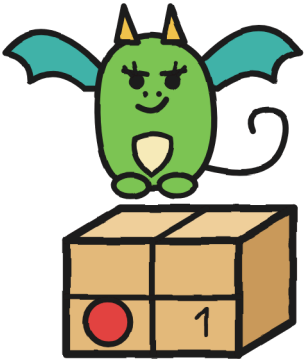
_____

And nobody else. –J.

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 1

# This Package Bites

Lui Eriksson




SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

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Text and illustrations: Lui Eriksson

US English version: LinguAula

SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

First edition: 2026

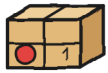
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CHAPTER 1

# The One That Can't Be Done

This notebook came out of moving box 14. The box said KITCHEN, in thick marker and the handwriting of someone in a hurry. There wasn't a single spoon inside: just this notebook, one sock and a rubber frog that belongs to nobody. I've asked my mom. I've asked the frog. Nobody claims it.

The notebook, though, I claimed. I wrote the title on the first page, in capitals, so that it would be clear right from the start:

DELIVERY NOTEBOOK by Gus. PRIVATE.

*"Private" means I read it first. —J.*

That green note wasn't there when I wrote "private." None of the green notes were. Julie adds them. In a single day she's already gotten into the habit of reading my notebook before I do and, sometimes, before I've even written it. But that comes later. First things first.



We arrived on a Tuesday. Today is Saturday. I've been in the neighborhood for four days and I already know one whole street: mine. It has six houses and, all around it, question marks.

Nobody asked me if I wanted to move. The grown-ups decided it in the kitchen, in that voice they use for things that have already been decided, and my mom called it "an opportunity," which is what grown-ups call things you can't send back.

The worst part wasn't leaving my room. It was finding something out about myself when we were already in the moving van: I had never made a friend. I'd had friends. That isn't the same thing. In my old neighborhood, friends came ready-made: they handed them out when you were three, at the park, along with your bucket and shovel, and that was that. I never learned the procedure. At school they teach you how to divide with decimals, but not how to make friends: you're supposed to come with them already.

So I did what I always do when I don't know how to do something: I made a plan.

My plan for making a friend:

1. Say hello.
2. Say something interesting.
3. ???

I got stuck on number 2. Number 3? Not a clue. I was stuck for three days. Back then I didn't know that number 3 was the easiest of the three, and that it fit into three words.

My new room didn't help either. It's full of unopened boxes and there's nothing of mine in it, so I sleep there the way you sleep in a hotel: in a borrowed bed, with my clothes close at hand. That's why I woke up so fast this morning when something flew past my window.

It was a package.

I'm putting it exactly like that, because that's exactly how it was. A cardboard package the size of a shoebox, with a red stamp on one side, flew past level with my window, in no hurry, like someone minding their own business. Then another one went by. And another. Nine packages in a row, like ducks, crossed the street and slipped, one after the other, through the mail slot of the shop across the way. (The other eleven, I found out later, had come back while I was asleep.)

The shop has a sign that says IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES. Underneath, smaller: "We deliver what nobody else will." And under that, even smaller, as if someone had added it on second thought: "(Nearly always)."

That gave me number 2: "I've seen flying packages."

*That's not interesting. It happens all the time.*

Julie wrote that note. I met her this very morning, in the shop across the street. She writes in green, and what she writes in green doesn't come off. I've tried an eraser, spit and the sleeve of my sweater, in that order. The eraser wore out. The green didn't.

I pulled my striped sweater on over my pajamas and crossed the street. Still in my pajamas, I mean. In my slippers. Some decisions get made by your body before your head finds out.



Inside, it smelled of cardboard and of something burned, like a candle that's just been blown out. On the left there was a shelf with a red sign, RETURNS, and on the shelf, twenty packages numbered from 1 to 20, each with its own stamp. In front of it, a witch in a purple hat was pointing at them one by one. Next to her, a girl in green overalls was counting them out loud:

"...eighteen, nineteen, twenty."

"They've all come back," said the witch. "Again."

Nobody asked me who I was or why I was wearing pajamas. In any shop, that would be strange. In that shop, it wasn't even the strangest thing all morning.

The witch is called Mara. She runs a shop for impossible deliveries and has a stamp that glows: when she brings it down, it gives off little sparks, and the sparks are where the burned smell comes from. Julie explained how it works in my own notebook, with a drawing full of arrows, which I'll sum up here because it takes up half a page:

- Package + stamp.
- Does the recipient sign, in ink that doesn't come off?

- YES: DELIVERED.
- NO: at dawn, the package flies back to its shelf.

*That way no package ever gets lost. Or delivered.*

The ones on the shelf are the returns: twenty packages that nobody has ever managed to deliver. And they're all sent by the same person. On every label, in the same place, in the same cramped handwriting, it said SENDER: R.

"Who's R.?" I asked.

"Someone with awful handwriting," said Mara.

And that was all. She said it the way you say things you've already said a hundred times, without looking at the shelf, looking instead at a spot on the wall where there was nothing to look at. Julie's lips moved along with hers. She knew the answer by heart, and I had a feeling it wasn't enough for her either.

Mara put nineteen returns into an enormous sack, the kind you sling over your shoulder. That night she had to deliver a piano to a lighthouse, miles and miles away, and, since she was going out anyway, she'd try them all again on the way. She'd be back at dawn. She said it without a scrap of hope, in the voice of someone watering a dead plant out of habit.

Only one was left on the shelf. The first in the row. Number 1.

"That one can't be done," said Mara, and it didn't sound as if she was saying it to us. "Just one rule: DON'T TOUCH THE SHELF."

"Of course," said Julie.

From where I was standing, I could see her fingers crossed behind her back. I didn't say anything. Now that I think about it, that was the first thing we ever shared: a two-second secret, before we even knew each other's names.

Julie spends her Saturdays at the shop. I didn't ask what she was to Mara: niece, assistant, punishment. Some questions are for the second day.

*It's the second day now. Ask. —J.*



As soon as the door closed, Julie looked me up and down. Taking her time. The way you look at a package to decide whether it deserves a stamp.

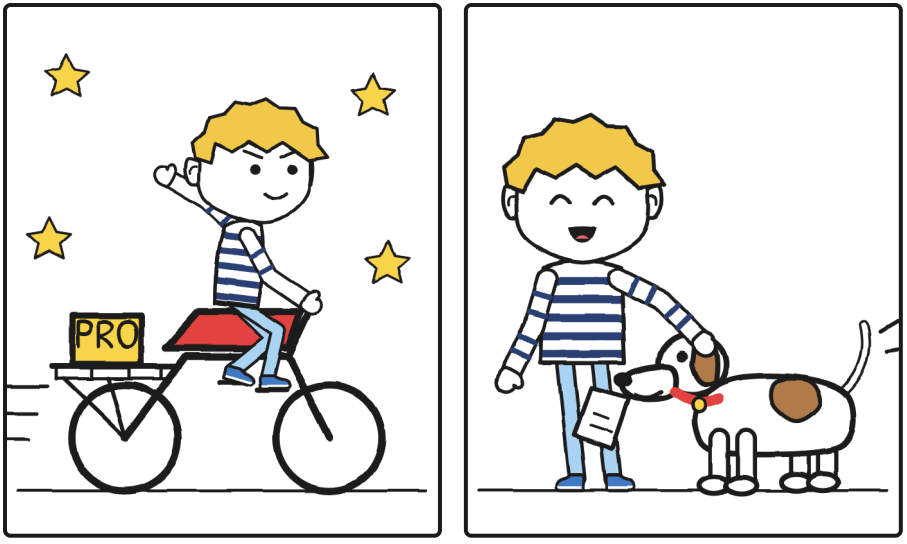
"Can you do deliveries?"

I have to be honest here, because this notebook is private and Julie's going to read it anyway.

The truth is, in my whole life I've delivered exactly one thing: our second-floor neighbor's newspaper, one Sunday, because it was lying in the entrance hall and the situation seemed to call for a hero. I gave it to his dog. The dog ate it. End of my career.

And I said what you say when you want to make a friend:

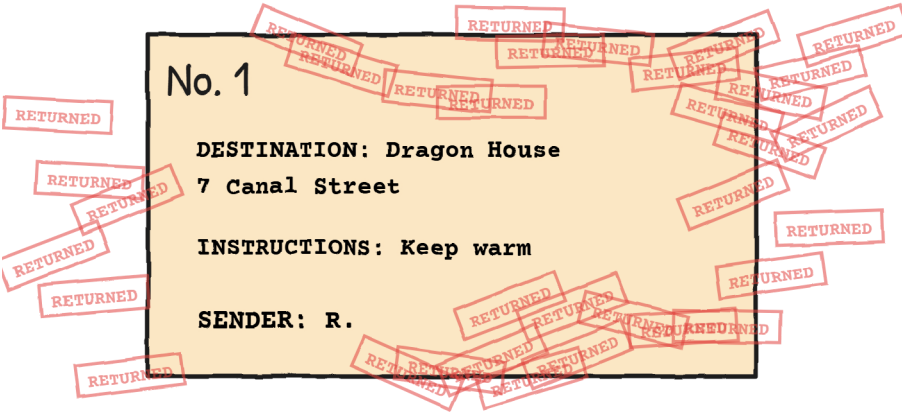
"Yes. In my old neighborhood I was a professional courier."




*Professional. For dogs.*

A lie is like a package with the stamp on: it flies off with great dignity, crosses the street without touching the ground and, sooner or later, comes back. What I didn't know then was when this one would come back, or who would read it out loud.

Julie didn't ask for proof. She went straight to the shelf and took down the only package left: number 1. The one that can't be done. Her hands were shaking slightly, but not from fear, or not only from fear: it was the kind of shaking you get when you've spent game after game on the bench and the coach finally calls your name. Mine were shaking too, but I hid it better: the only giveaway was that I'd put my sweater on backward.




I counted the RETURNED stamps. Thirty-seven. The label was more stamp than label.

Underneath all that red, in case anyone was interested, it said:

- DESTINATION: Dragon House, 7 Canal Street.
- INSTRUCTIONS: Keep warm.
- SENDER: R.

"If we deliver it before dawn," said Julie, "Mara will see I can handle the returns."

"And if we don't?"

"If we don't, it flies back by itself, and it's as if nothing ever happened."

It sounded like an excellent plan to me. It had the two things a plan should have: a prize if it goes right and no consequences if it goes wrong. I still didn't know what was inside.



Someone rang a bike bell. Twice, the way you knock on a door that isn't yours. A boy appeared at the shop window, wearing a helmet and a yellow backpack you could read from inside: LIGHTNING DELIVERIES. TEN MINUTES OR IT'S FREE.

"Impossible Deliveries?" he said, in the voice of someone who'd made the same joke on other Saturdays. "The only impossible thing around here is you two delivering anything."

*Tony. Delivers really boring stuff really fast.*

"Well, today we're delivering this," said Julie, and held up the package.

Tony read "Dragon House" and laughed so hard that his helmet fell off. It rolled all the way to the door. He picked it up, still laughing, and when he stood up again he wasn't laughing anymore.

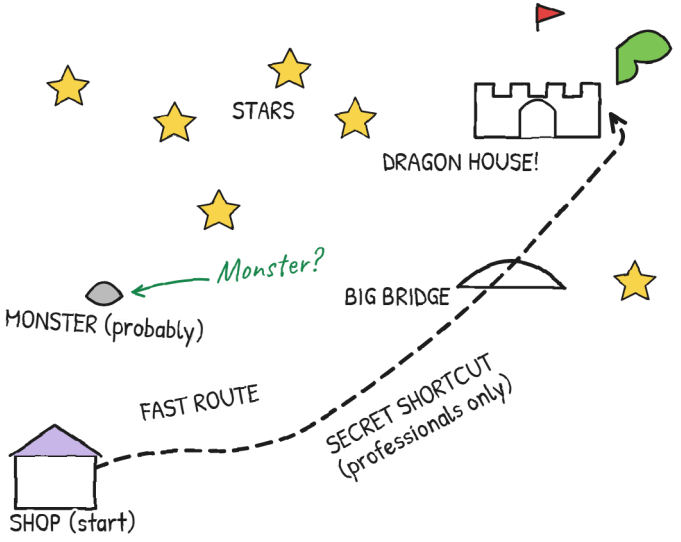
"There's no number 7 on Canal Street," he said. "It goes from 5 to 9. I know because I looked for it."

"And why did you look for it?" asked Julie.

Tony put his helmet on, rang his bell again for no reason and pedaled off at top speed, which is what Tony does with questions he doesn't want to answer. I was left with two facts: he'd looked for number 7, and LIGHTNING wasn't fast at everything.



I drew a delivery map. Professional couriers make maps, and I had, technically, said I was one.




The map had a FAST ROUTE, a SECRET SHORTCUT (professionals only), the BIG BRIDGE, a MONSTER (probably) and six stars. The stars didn't do anything. It just seemed to me that a map without stars isn't a serious map.

*The monster isn't on the way either. I checked. —J.*

On the real route, which had no stars, we crossed the Big Bridge. In the daytime it's down and everybody crosses it: bikes, ladies pulling shopping carts, a man with a duck. Julie walked across it down the exact middle, talking to me very fast about the stamp and the ink, without looking at the water once. I thought it must be because she'd seen it lots of times before. Sticking out of her overalls pocket was an hourglass she'd taken off the counter. It can't tell you how long it is until dawn; all it's good for is watching the sand trickle down and getting nervous, like when the teacher says "Five minutes left!" and you're only halfway through the test. I realized she was the kind of person who takes an hourglass on a delivery. I liked that. All I'd brought was my pajamas.

7 Canal Street wasn't a house. It was a wall.

Tony was right: the numbers went from 5 straight to 9, and in between there was a smooth, pale wall with no doors or windows, no doorbell, not even one of those little gaps that houses leave so you can imagine someone's at home. All it had, very low down, almost at ground level, at just the right height for something very small, was a brass plate with a paw-shaped hollow in it. Four small hollows at the top and one big one underneath, as if someone had pressed something there a long time ago and the wall had kept the shape.

"Maybe it's a mail slot," I said.

The package didn't fit. Not sideways. Not corner first.

We tried everything you can try with a wall:

1. Knock on it. (Nothing.)
2. Shout at it. (Nothing, but louder.)
3. Look over it. I climbed onto Julie's shoulders (she's stronger than she looks) and stuck my head over the top. On the other side there was ANOTHER wall.
4. Give up. That was the one we were best at.

A lady watering her geraniums was watching us from her balcony, her watering can stopped in mid-air, like someone who has seen this movie before.

"That package has been showing up for years," she said. "It always leaves exactly as it came."

She didn't say it unkindly; she said it like someone reading out the weather forecast. Then she went on watering. In that neighborhood, I realized, a package that couldn't be delivered was just another kind of weather.



It was cold. A brand-new fall chill, the kind that creeps up your sleeves. Julie read the label again, quietly, as if it might have changed since the last time.

"'Keep warm.' It's spent years on a freezing shelf."

I'm new. When something says "keep warm," I keep it warm. New kids read the instructions: they're all we've got, because we don't know yet which instructions it's all right to ignore. Everyone else has been in one place so long that they don't read anymore; they just know. And sometimes what they know is wrong.

I stuffed the package up my sweater, we crossed back over the Big Bridge, and I sat down on the grate outside Ellie's bakery, where the hot air from the oven comes out. The grate is at ground level, right up against the wall, and warm air rises out of it smelling of crusts. I stayed there, back straight, with the package against my belly, with as much dignity as you can have sitting on the ground in your pajamas with a box under your clothes. Julie turned the hourglass over and stayed on her feet, keeping watch, without saying anything.

*You look like a pregnant mailbox.*

Without saying anything out loud, I mean.

We stayed like that for ages. It smelled of bread. I was starting to sweat. To stop thinking about the sweat, we talked; or I talked, and Julie answered in as few words as possible.

"Why do you care so much about delivering this one?" I asked her. "There are nineteen others."

She turned the hourglass over before the sand had run out.

"Because counting isn't the same as delivering," she said. "I've spent a lot of Saturdays counting."

Then she asked me what my old neighborhood was like, and I nearly told her the truth: that I couldn't remember doing anything there, only having it. That I was like the rubber frog: still without a place of my own. I opened my mouth to say it and something else came out, something about a motorcycle with medals. She nodded without looking at me. I got the feeling she didn't believe me anymore. She didn't mind. And that was the best thing all morning.

Then something tapped me on the belly. TAP.

"Was that your stomach?" asked Julie.

"My stomach doesn't go TAP."

TAP. TAP.

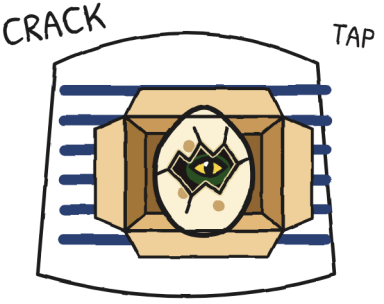
I pulled my sweater aside. Under the lid of the package there was something round and pale and speckled that wasn't a shoebox, or anything else that comes in a box. It had a crack in it that grew while I watched.

CRACK.

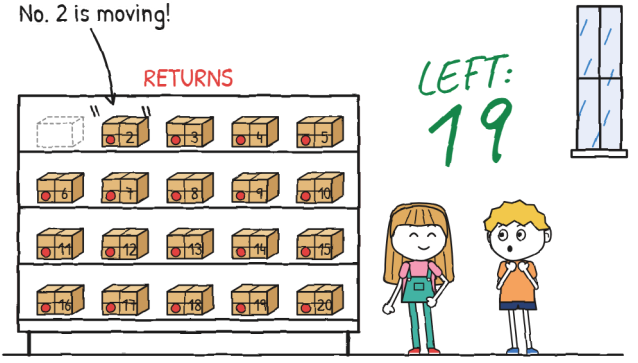
And the package looked at me.

A yellow eye, wide open, right in the middle of the crack. It wasn't looking at Julie, who was the one who knew about packages. It wasn't looking at the bakery, or the hourglass, or the sky that everything flies back across at dawn. It was looking

at me. And for the first time in four days, in that neighborhood of houses with question marks, somebody seemed completely sure who I was.




Nobody had warned me that there are deliveries where the package chooses you.




No. 2 · FRAGILE. DO NOT OPEN BEFORE THUNDER.

I read it twice. I'm new: I read everything. And nowhere did it say you couldn't wait for the thunder sitting on a blue stool.

And outside, it was starting to rain.

*I checked the weather forecast. There's a storm coming. —J.*