

And nobody else. —J.

If you find it, don't open it before thunder.



This stamp marks what only happens in the story: don't you do it. If it lasts several pages, it says FROM HERE and TO HERE. In a real storm, the last page is in charge. —J.

IMPOSSIBLE DELIVERIES · 2

Do Not Open Before Thunder

Lui Eriksson



SIZE XL · Illustrated novel · 13+

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Second book in the series. The first: “This Package Bites”.

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No thunder was harmed in the writing of this book. —J.



CHAPTER 1

Storm Chaser

In the shop opposite there's a package that shakes.

Last Saturday it moved just once. Since then it hasn't stopped: a fine, steady trembling, like a small dog's in the vet's waiting room. It's been like that for seven days. A little more each day.

And I have a new notebook.

I used up Notebook 1. Mara, who owns Impossible Deliveries, gave me this one: blue cover, and the shop's red stamp in one corner. On the first page I wrote the title, with a new word in it:

DELIVERY NOTEBOOK 2 · by Gus. OFFICIAL.

"Official" means I read it first. Officially. —J.

Mara says official notebooks aren't for doodling in. We'll see: this one already has a drawing in it.

What you need to know about the other notebook: two Saturdays ago, Julie (the one with the green notes) and I delivered, at night, across a footbridge and without a single

grown-up, an egg that nobody had managed to deliver in years. Now it's Crumb, a dragon hatchling who copies everything I do. Mara, the witch who runs the shop, punished us: every Saturday there, at ten. I'm the new kid in the neighbourhood, and almost everything I own is still in boxes.

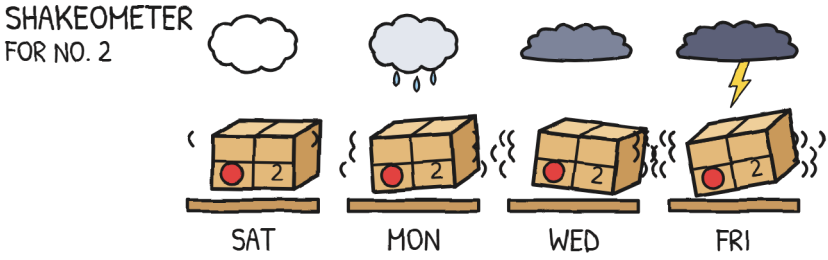
The one that shakes is No. 2. It's on the returns shelf, with a label I know by heart: I've read it every afternoon this week, standing there without touching it, while Mara pretended not to see me:

- No. 2 · FRAGILE.
- DESTINATION: Flora, 9 Canal Street.
- INSTRUCTIONS: DO NOT OPEN BEFORE THUNDER.
- SENDER: R.

All around it, twenty-three RETURNED stamps. I counted them twice, in case one had fallen off.

A return is a package nobody has managed to deliver: if whoever receives it doesn't sign for it in ink that doesn't come off, at dawn it flies back to its shelf, in a line, like ducks. Nineteen are left: it says so on the wall, in green, in Julie's handwriting, and what Julie writes in green doesn't come off. They're all sent by the same person, R., and the only thing anyone knows about R. is the terrible handwriting.

Every afternoon I wrote down how much it shook and what the weather was like: that's how the SHAKEOMETER FOR NO. 2 came about. On Friday, the cloud had a lightning bolt inside it.



It isn't shaking with fear: it's shaking because a storm is coming. On Saturday, at six in the evening. I've checked the forecast six times. —J.

I read the note twice. The second time, only the part about six o'clock.



On Saturday, at ten, Mara (purple hat, a stamp that gives off sparks smelling of a candle just blown out) was waiting for us behind the counter with No. 2 in her hands. Not on the shelf: in her hands. Next to the stamp the rubber frog was still sitting, mine since it stopped being anybody's. And Tony, the LIGHTNING courier, was standing there with his helmet on: Saturdays are his punishment too, and Tony serves his punishments the way he delivers, on time and without taking anything off.

"I've taken it myself twenty-three times," said Mara. "Not once in a storm."

Mara ran her thumb over the label. I looked at the shop window, getting greyer and greyer: today's trip wasn't going to be the same.

"This one," Mara announced, "you three will deliver. This afternoon."

Julie jumped so high that she almost touched the sign that said LEFT: 19, and she was talking again before she landed. I didn't jump: I was left holding two words, "this afternoon", and a time, six o'clock, that weighed more than the package.



Mara laid down three conditions, counting them off on her fingers:

1. You leave at five, before the storm arrives, and you stay at Flora's until it has passed.
2. Your families already know, and so does Flora.
3. The rule is the one on the label: it doesn't open before thunder. And it has to be the thunder overhead: faraway ones don't count.

I recognised the trick: they were almost the rules from Vera's telling-off (Vera, Crumb's owner), only said beforehand instead of afterwards. Mara hadn't been at the telling-off and had found out all the same: in this neighbourhood, telling-offs get there before the packages do.

"Aren't you coming?" asked Julie.

"I have things to do here," said Mara, and looked through the shop window at the sky, which was turning grey.

At the end of the counter lay a folded blanket, a pair of ski earmuffs and a saucepan. I saw all of it. I kept my eyes on the package.

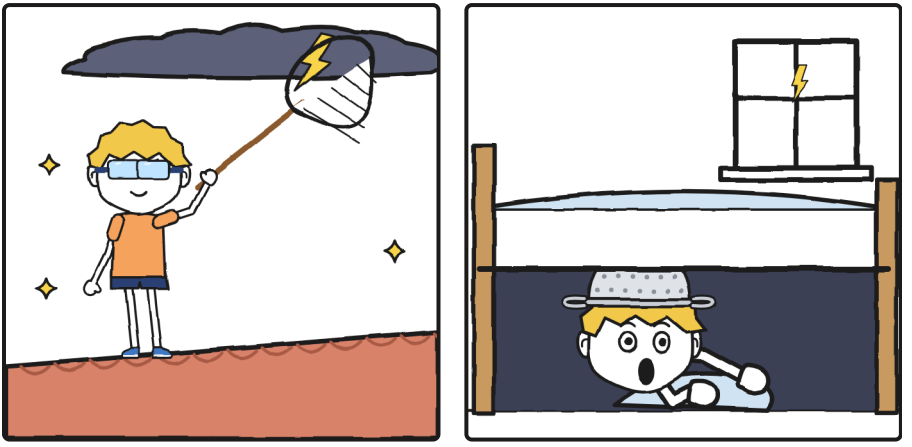
Then Julie looked at me.

"Do you like storms?"

She asked it looking me straight in the face. I could have told the truth. I said this:

“I love them. In my old neighbourhood I was a professional storm chaser.”

In the other notebook, a lie took a day and a night to come back. In this one I decided to save it the journey: I drew the lie that very morning and, in the panel next to it, the truth.

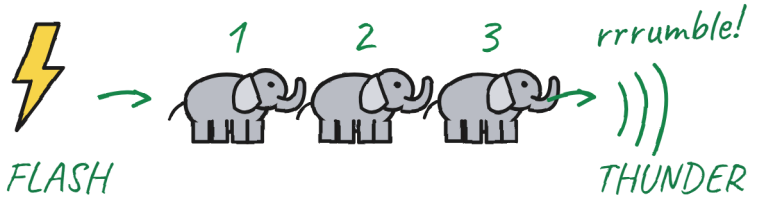


The colander was the one from our kitchen, steel, with two handles. It didn’t stop lightning. For me, having something over my head helped. Now it was in some moving box, next to the scissors my mum had been hunting for all week.

Julie taught me how to count a storm, in my notebook, without asking permission, and in green.

You count from the flash to the thunder, in elephants: “one elephant” lasts about a second, and every three make a kilometre. That tells you, more or less, how far away that lightning struck; where the next one will strike, it doesn’t. What

the count doesn't tell you either is when it's safe to go out, and that, according to Julie, is another rule, with no drawing: half an hour after the last thunder.



one elephant, two elephants, three elephants...

1 elephant = 1 second

3 elephants = 1 kilometre (more or less)

0 elephants = OVERHEAD!

↖ That's the thunder on the label.
The faraway ones don't open the package.

More elephants: that lightning struck further away.

If you hear thunder, even far away: take cover!

I tried it under my breath and out came speedy elephants, the useless kind. I didn't need to count anything, because I love storms, but I wrote it down anyway, just in case.

Tony read the label over my shoulder, the way he reads everything that isn't his.

"LIGHTNING doesn't deliver in storms," he said, and showed us the small print on his yellow backpack: LIGHTNING DELIVERIES · TEN MINUTES OR IT'S FREE and, through Julie's magnifying glass, an asterisk: *Except storms.

"There isn't a storm yet," said Julie.

Tony went over the small print again in case it said anything about "yet". It said nothing.

So Tony came with us. He counts elephants all in one go, "onetwothree!", as if they were a single delivery. According to Tony, every storm is one kilometre away. I don't know whether it's bravery or a shortage of elephants.



At five I went across to my house for my raincoat; Julie waited for me in the entrance hall. My mum was waiting at the door of the flat with the raincoat dangling from her hand. She has a theory about orange: that you can see it from far away. I've never known where she plans to be looking from.

"Wear the orange one," she said. "Are you sure you want to go? You, when it thunders..."

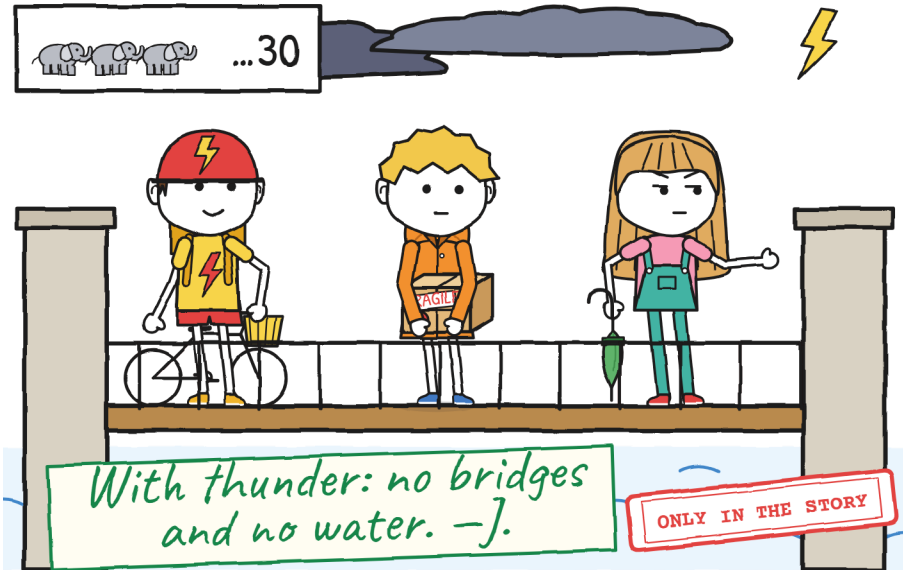
"BYE, MUM!"

I went down the stairs two at a time. I'd worked out that, with the echo in the entrance hall, half of whatever my mum said would get lost on the way. It didn't. Julie was downstairs.

"You, when it thunders..." WHAT? –J.

We crossed the Big Bridge under a sky growing blacker by the minute. At night they raise it so the boats can pass; by day everybody crosses it, and at that hour it was only us and a man in a hurry going the other way, which is the right way to be going when a storm's coming. I carried No. 2 in both hands, very upright. Tony pushed his bike: it's the slowest I've ever seen LIGHTNING go without being lost.

Halfway across, Julie gave the water her curt wave: short, unsmiling, the way you greet someone you don't like. She's done it since the night of the footbridge. I think that's the deal: she greets the water and the water lets her through.



Far away, the sky lit up.

It was a flicker behind the clouds, soundless, like someone switching the light on and off in a room you're not in. Julie stopped dead and counted elephants under her breath with her eyes closed. She counted thirty before she heard anything. I counted along with her, inside my head, with my speedy elephants, and got forty-two.

Rrrumble.

"That lightning struck about ten kilometres away," she worked out. "The forecast says the storm arrives at six."

"That was thunder!" Tony exclaimed. "Can we open it now?"

"That one doesn't count for opening the package," said Julie, without opening her eyes. "It's ten kilometres away; the one on the label is the one overhead: zero elephants. But you can hear it now: take cover! Run!"

I ran all the way to Canal Street, pretending I hadn't heard anything. Neither the rrrumble nor the bit about six o'clock.

"Was that a hiccup?" asked Julie, without slowing down.

"No," I said. "Hic!"

Tony doubled over the handlebars and laughed so much that the bike veered off to one side. Julie didn't laugh. She narrowed her eyes, the way she does when she's reading something that isn't written down.



One thunderclap, one hiccup: it's been happening since I was little. If the storm is far away, it stops at one; if it's overhead, another one comes, and another, every three seconds, until the storm goes. It isn't fear. It's something my body does without consulting me, like growing or sneezing, and, like growing, you can't stop it by putting on a blank face. I know, because I've tried every face.

It's called being scared. –J.

On Canal Street, Vera, the one with the red hair, was already waiting for us at the door of the Dragon House, right next to Flora's, with Crumb in her arms. As soon as Crumb saw me, she

put on my face: she always does, looks at me for a second, checks which face I'm wearing and puts it on.

I left No. 2 in the basket of Tony's bike and opened my arms.

"It's her first storm," said Vera, and handed her over into my arms. "She copies everything you do, Gus. Everything you feel, too. And if she gets scared, don't pull her: she holds on. When it has passed, three knocks on Flora's yard wall and I'll come and get her."

"I don't feel anything," I replied. "I love storms."

I said it with my chest puffed out, and Crumb, in my arms, puffed hers out in just the same way, neck stretched: the very picture of someone who loves storms, in two sizes. Vera looked at the pair of us, one on top of the other with the same face, and said nothing. Vera saves things up for when they're needed.

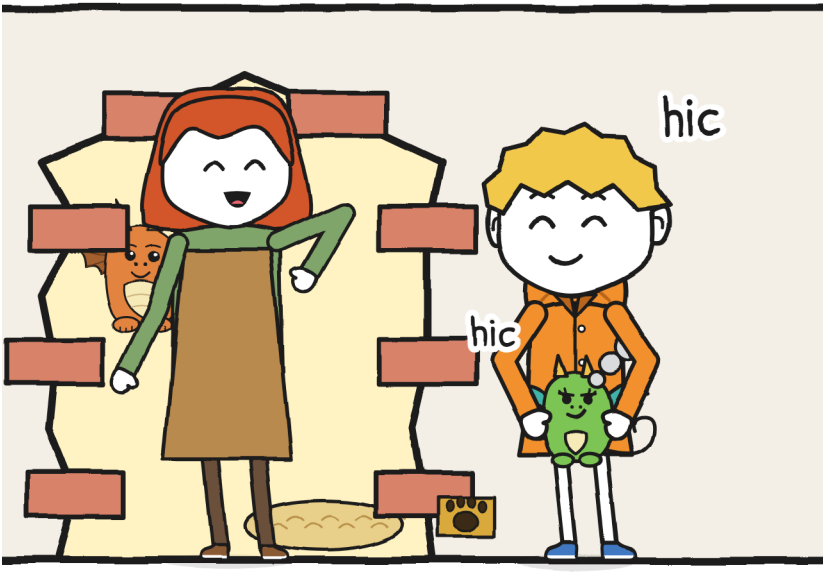
Far off, it thundered. I hiccuped. Crumb hiccuped, and smoke came out of her nose.

"Inside, now," Vera cut in, and pushed us towards Flora's door.

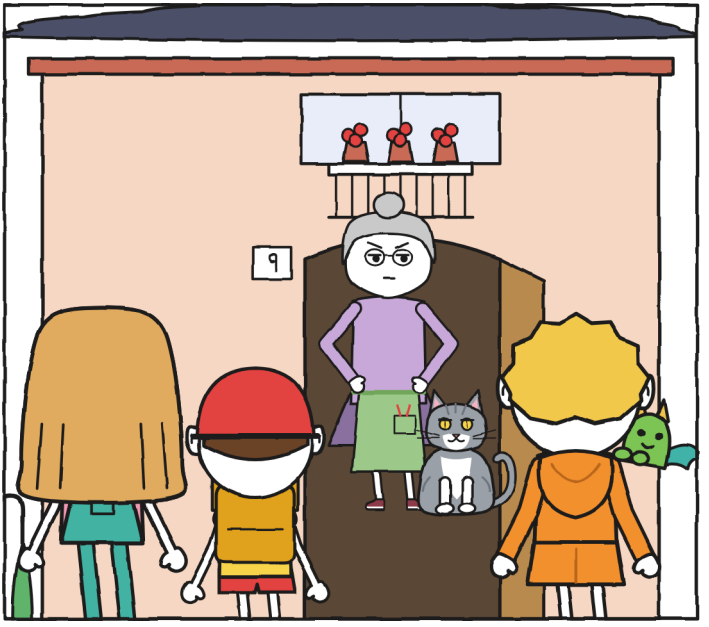
Flora's is the house with the geraniums, the ones on the balcony from which a lady watched us two Saturdays ago, her watering can stopped in mid-air.

She opened the door before we could knock: a lady with a grey bun and glasses, in a green gardener's apron full of pockets and, between her feet, a grey cat with a white chest who looked at us

as if we were a package that wasn't meant for him. She looked at the box. She looked at the sky. She looked at Crumb. In that order, giving each the same amount of time, which wasn't much.



"Vera's hatchling. Don't let her scorch my ferns," she said. "Come in, rain's coming. But I'm warning you: I don't sign for stones."


9

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.

Everyone in their own size. Same storm. —J.

FOR FAMILIES AND TEACHERS

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