

Louis arrives alone in the shared kitchenette, cool with the roller-blind lowered. He toasts two slices of bread and spreads the butter thickly, imagining he's making it for Kitty Greene – even though Kitty Greene has long since gone.

Still, Louis feels her hand in his as he helps her sit down on the stool, her breath labouring as it always laboured. He pictures the sign on the drive outside: 'Children's Home and Residential Care for Vulnerable Young People,' shiny in the middle, rougher round the edges. Louis's never thought of himself as vulnerable, let alone Kitty Greene. Not like the two teenagers with autism who live in the ground floor flats, or like Sam Clifton who's always setting fire to things and trashing his flat, flat number five.

Louis bites the toast but even with all that butter, it's dry in his mouth. He takes a slurp of tea. Without Kitty Greene in the kitchenette, there's no 'ooh, hot' and no 'ah, lovely' after to distract him, only silence. The aloneness reminds him of when he was first placed in the children's home eight years ago.

'There are lovely people here, Louis,' a woman said (who was Dr Angela, but Louis didn't know that then). She'd pronounced his name the English way, 'Loo-iss,' because Maman wasn't there to correct her and, although he was there, Louis had lost all ability to speak.

The 'lovely people' consisted of a terror in ripped jeans, who had an unhappy habit of punching Louis in the stomach when no one was looking, and Eliza Wishaw, who made him pee himself on three separate occasions. She reminded him of the shrew Maman's cat had once presented them with, on the doorstep of the home they used to share. Louis can't quite picture that house, though he can picture the dead shrew well enough with its swollen head, long pink nose and little, bloodied ears.

'Loo-wee,' the woman, Dr Angela, with glossy black hair later said, wedding ring flashing in the stripy sunlight in her office. Perhaps his father had told her to pronounce his name the

French way, though Louis didn't see how as he'd not once seen his father since arriving here.

'Maybe you could draw something for me?'

This is the first emergency Louis can remember, heartbeat chasing to keep up with the bad words in his head. '*Dégage!*' Louis curled his fingers around the pencil and stabbed the sharp point in Dr Angela's slender hand.

Louis finishes the dregs of his tea. 'Ooh, hot' he says into the silence, even though the gulp of tea was cool. He fills the sink with hot water and adds just a drop or two of the green liquid, the amount Martin, his Support Worker, had shown him several times so that the kitchenette didn't flood with bubbles. As he washes his cup and plate, he spies the calendar on the wall. Saturday: his appointments with Dr Angela are at 8.30am every Saturday.

Not all the residents need to see her. Some see Dr Croft, like Kitty Greene used to. Dr Croft is more important than Dr Angela because he wears a tie and a name badge, like doctors do on television. Dr Angela wears patterned skirts that reveal how thin she is. Dr Croft has a whole surgery down the road, with his own computer and his own nameplate on the door. Dr Angela has the office next to the atrium with a blind that stays half-open and half-closed. Languid.

'Maman called my father *alanguid*,' Louis said to Kitty Greene once. 'She talked in French, but she said the bad things in English.'

Kitty Greene sipped her tea before placing it back with an 'ooh, hot.'

'That's a funny word to use,' she said. Louis looked away from her bluish lips and watched her make several swipes at opening the cupboard door to get a bowl. '*Lan-gwid!* Sounds like squid.'

Louis pictured the squid he'd seen once in a book. The creature spilled out over the sea floor, soft and fleshy, which then brought to his mind the pale bulge on Eliza Wishaw's forehead. The disfigurement (the word Martin recently reminded Louis to use to describe it) had been the cause of Louis's second emergency.

Eliza Wishaw had sat next to him in the dining room – which was her first mistake. Her second mistake was to ask him something, turning her face to reveal a close-up of her disfigurement. Heat had prickled Louis's head and hands. He didn't know what she was asking, he could only look at the disfigurement and how swollen it looked and it only seemed right to try to puncture the lump with the fork he was holding. Instead of bursting, four pricks of blood bloomed, like the bulge was part of her and made of flesh. Her scream hurt Louis's ears; he could not shut it out, even crouched up in a ball with his arms wrapped around his head.

*'Tais-toi!'* he chanted as the scream became Maman's.

Finally, Louis's 'shut up' chant worked and there was a silent pause.

'What language is that?' not asked by one of the doctors or care workers but by a soft, curious voice.

Louis twisted a fraction to peek at the girl. It was Kitty Greene, with her rolling blue eyes and breathless voice; a child, Louis rejoiced, who seemed perfectly formed and not violent.

*'Je veux partir,'* he'd loudly whispered, as though wanting to leave was a secret never before spoken. Kitty Greene pressed her head against his. Louis hoped she didn't have nits.

'One day, Louis,' she'd said, pronouncing Louis correctly and guessing his request to leave even though she didn't yet speak French. 'One day.'

In the quiet of the kitchenette eight years on, having moved on from the Children's Home but only as far as Residential Care next door, Louis pulls the plug on the washing-up water and watches it disappear. Only bubbles are left and the round shape of them reminds Louis of Kitty Greene's eyes, the way they shone when she spoke.

She once said to him: 'You don't talk about your dad, do you?'

Kitty Greene had a way of asking Louis things that made him feel understood. Apart from when he talked to Dr Angela, Louis never felt understood. Kitty Greene was of course smarter than Louis – and pretty, or so Louis thought, with her bushy blond hair and flashing blue eyes

like rolling marbles. Louis has Maman's green eyes and his father's long legs, and large hands like, who knows?

He wriggled his cold, bare toes on the kitchenette floor. 'Sam Clifton told me I was a wanker.'

Kitty Greene spluttered then took a breath and another. After a pause, she began to pour cornflakes into the bowl, some spilling with her unsteady hand. 'Sam Clifton's like That-Bastard-Kai.'

Kitty Greene ran out of breath saying his name, as though her lungs were full of holes. She never expanded on who That-Bastard-Kai was. She only ever uttered his name after her mother had visited wearing sunglasses and a yellow bruise.

Breakfast finished, Louis walks back to his flat, flat number four. He showers and dresses and combs his hair in the side parting that used to please Maman – because she said it made him look like the man who was teaching her to dance and Maman loved him because he wasn't languid.

'*Mon professeur de danse*, he is not languid,' she'd said, veering from French to English and back again. '*Emporte-moi!* But then, I have your father,' (she always said 'your father' in English). '*Et voilà*, I have you too.'

Maybe, if Maman hadn't been living away from France for so long she would have been more French and said '*c'est la vie*.' Instead, she bit her fingernails until they bled.

Louis taps his feet on the laminate floor which makes a satisfying clickety-click just like a dancer, though not as bouncy because, as Maman said, he has 'too much' of his father in him. Once he understood that his father wasn't actually somewhere hidden inside his body, Louis wondered if he was like the man with long legs. But other than knowing the fact his father was English, Louis has no memory of him ever speaking.

All except one. That memory is like a nightmare. Louis tells himself it *is* a nightmare and not an actual, true event he watched from his bedroom window, in the house he can't quite

remember, the one where he lived with Maman before he came here. Louis dreamed it over and over when he first arrived. The memory of his father shoved him awake in the dark hours, a wet puddle beneath him and a cry of, *'mon dieu,'* on his dry lips. Louis tries to believe he isn't like his father, but he worries still, as he worried as a boy, that his father really is hidden somewhere within.

Exhausted, the morning then only brought the Anxiety of school. In the life Louis can barely remember, Louis hadn't gone to school; he'd stayed with Maman and laid out building blocks in a particular pattern and lined up toy cars in colour order. He was behind many of the children here, most of whom attended Overcroft School.

Several knee-wobbling weeks passed at Overcroft School until Miss Cunnings invited him to join her 'Nurture Group.'

'Just until you feel settled,' Miss Cunnings said.

'Autism Spectrum Condition' slipped in and out of his hearing as well as 'Post Traumatic Stress.' Lengthy discussions about 'Emotional Numbing' and 'Bedwetting' followed Louis like Kitty Greene's persistent cough.

'Shall we read this book together, Louis?'

According to the title, it was about 'somebody special' but Louis turned away from Miss Cunnings to grab his favourite book: an encyclopaedia about Space.

'The most distant star that can be seen is Deneb, located in the constellation of Cygnus the Swan.'

Louis learned these facts in English but snatches of Maman's voice reading Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 'The Little Prince' still sang in his head – "*'j'habiterai dans l'une d'ellesall...'*"

In the Space encyclopaedia, he searched for the star where Maman might be living. He tried to explain this to Miss Cunnings, in French because it was too complicated to translate, but no one at Overcroft School spoke French well enough; it wasn't a subject they taught.

Kitty Greene, however, not having any learning difficulties, attended St Mark's Catholic School where she had friends called Meredith and George and where they did teach French. She started to whisper, shyly at first, odd words, then phrases, then stumbling conversation.

On one of the holidays for the long-term residents, Louis told Kitty Greene about Maman's star. They stood having their photo taken next to a statue of somebody famous. In the sunshine, the statue appeared to be dancing. Millions of small flies gathered around them, on them, in their hair. A boy spat a globule of phlegm which clung, drowned fly and all, to Louis's shoe.

Eliza Wishaw began to cry, her shrew's eyes shriveling under the bulge on her forehead, and some other girl joined in (because she always copied) and people, holidaymakers, were looking and some were whispering. While the care workers' attention turned to Eliza Wishaw, Louis quoted from memory some of 'Le Petit Prince' – in a quiet way and not directly to Kitty Greene, though she stood just the other side of the statue, below its waving hand. The quote might not have been very accurate because Louis was starting to forget French, but it was the best he could do, given the flies were settling in his mouth as he spoke.

'Oh, wait, hang on,' breathed Kitty Green. 'What was that about stars? So... "*Look at the night?*"'

It was like magic, to hear Kitty Greene translating. Louis repeated the passage, not daring to look at her in case it broke the spell.

'Ah... "*In one of the stars I will be living? In one of them I will be laughing.*"' Kitty Greene gave a husky, raspy sound that made the flies disappear, even though they still flew in Louis's mouth. 'Is that from a book? Did you read it?'

'No,' he said, thinking of Maman clutching her worn copy of 'Le Petit Prince.' Once he was in care, he never saw that book of hers again. It was gone, like Maman.

\*

With one final sweep of his side-parting, Louis closes the door to his flat, flat number four, and makes his way to Dr Angela's office. As he passes what was Kitty Greene's door, flat number three, Louis holds his own hand to stop himself giving the door a sharp knock, like he used to.

Kitty Greene always took several seconds to answer, although she usually sat just beyond the door laboring over homework. The last time Louis knocked, minutes passed. He'd rapped again, searching the corridor, anxious about the time and whether he'd be late for Dr Angela. When she answered, 'Hello, Kitty Greene,' was all he said.

'Louis,' she'd whispered.

Louis had carried on, as he carries on now, to his appointment, not waiting to see if Kitty Greene returned to her homework.

Louis trips downstairs, along the ground floor corridor and into the atrium. Apart from the brown-tipped pot plants which hang about like forgotten belongings, the atrium is hard-edged. There's a glass door to the roadside, which he only uses when he needs something from the shop across the road. Wintry light from the window lantern above forces him to look out, even though he doesn't want to see the crisp, blue sky. Louis doesn't like this obsession with letting the outside in. If he could have his way, he'd put blinds on the window lantern and keep them permanently half-closed like the languid blind in Dr Angela's office.

Just as he starts to feel a building pressure behind his eyelids, the security coded glass door to the street outside opens and a woman with grey hair strides up to him before he can hide.

She says: 'Ah, hello. Yes, you. Could you give this to Martin, please? He forgot his lunch.'

Louis takes the smooth bag she hands him. He opens it and looks inside. It contains triangular sliced sandwiches, branded crisps and a two finger Kit-Kat.

'The most distant star that can be seen is Deneb,' Louis tells her as she leaves, steely hair firmly in place, 'located in the constellation of Cygnus the Swan.'

The door clicks shut behind her.

Louis stands for a moment, undecided. Ordinarily, he'd take the bag to Kitty Greene, because she'd know what to do with it, but without this option he instead takes out the Kit-Kat and eats it.

The cloying smells of cleaning fluid mixed with chocolate and burning toast wrap themselves around Louis before travelling on to the little launderette and the day room. Louis peers into the day room.

'Hello,' Sam Clifton says, holding a jam-covered knife. 'What have you got there?'

Louis backs away but Sam Clifton snatches the bag.

After inspecting the neat contents and the crumpled wrapper in Louis's hand, Sam Clifton says that Martin, who always tells Louis the importance of being independent, didn't make his own lunch for work. Louis watches Sam Clifton throw the whole bag in the bin before turning to him with a dangerous smile. Louis quickly steps back into the atrium, forehead sweating.

To help keep the sweating (or his Anxiety as Dr Angela calls it), to a minimum, Louis makes sure journeys via the atrium are spread throughout the week.

Going to the shop: Mondays (but sometimes Thursdays when the Anxiety gets too much).

Attending chess club in the day room: Wednesdays.

Dancing: the first and third Fridays of each month. Louis used to dance with Kitty Greene, though she often sat down to use some puffer thing. He'd sit next to her and sway. Louis's not sure anyone, particularly Maman, would call it dancing, but beside Kitty Greene, it felt like it.

He also has to cross the atrium on Saturdays to see Dr Angela, once at 8.28 and once again at 9.32.

'Good morning, Louis,' Dr Angela says, tucking her sleek, black hair behind her ear with one hand and gesturing for Louis to take a seat with the other, ring flashing. 'You look well this morning,' she says, glancing at his side-parting.

'Hello, Dr Angela,' Louis replies, and then he remembers to say: 'How are you today?'



Dr Angela smiles as she replies but Louis's not listening. He's thinking about before, when he'd asked her how she was, and her response had been interrupted.

'I...' she'd begun but he never heard how Dr Angela was that day, or how pleased she was to be asked, because she was brought to a halt by a harassed Martin barging into the office.

'Dr Croft needs you.' A glance, a mumble and then: 'Her heart's stopped,' which made Dr Angela run. Louis was left with only the languid blind for company – and Martin.

'Sorry, Louis.'

Louis tried taking deep breaths, a technique Dr Angela had taught him to help control his Anxiety. But his breath was quick, heart galloping. Martin's voice, quiet through the whooshing noise in his ears, was telling Louis to go for a walk or to stay there or to head to the day room and watch television.

'But I don't want to pass through the atrium four times,' Louis remembers saying. 'There, back, there, back again.'

Some negotiation followed but Bad Words began to fill his head, the ones Maman had screamed at his father when Louis was just a boy of seven; when he'd peeked through his bedroom window, the outside flooding in, just in time to see his father, not at all languid, kick the suitcase Maman clung to – '*Brûle en enfer!*' – and then plunge the carving knife into her stomach.

'*Brûle en enfer!*' Louis had cried at a flushed Martin.

Together, they'd struggled back across the atrium and up the stairs and past Kitty Greene's door, flat number three, which seemed to swing on its hinges in surprise.

Dr Angela, hair askew, ring dull on her finger, finally appeared. Having her in his flat, flat number four, felt all wrong to Louis because he didn't have the languid blind at his window, he had curtains that stayed drawn. Martin's grip was tight. 'Burn in hell' still screamed inside Louis's head, '*Brûle en enfer!*'

Dr Angela repeatedly said 'sorry' as she injected Louis in the buttock.

‘*Brûle...*’ he began, but a shiny calm enveloped him. He was a polished star rolling over the smooth sky. He glided the jumbled shapes of the morning into position, two words: Kitty Greene.

‘Louis,’ Dr Angela said. ‘I think, if you feel calm enough, you should come to the hospital.’ Louis refused. ‘But it’s for Kitty, Kitty Greene.’

Back in the present, Dr Angela is smiling and waving her hand before Louis’s eyes. ‘Louis? Are you listening?’ Her glossy black hair looks especially glossy. Louis tells her so. She smiles again and says: ‘I hear you’ve been making pizza with Eliza Wishaw.’

Louis nods and tells her, ‘yes, I’ve been making pizza with Eliza Wishaw. Eliza Wishaw now lives in flat number three. I’ve been making pizza with her.’

‘That’s great, Louis. Do you like making pizza?’

Louis shrugs, thinking of Kitty Greene’s noisy breathing when they’d made pizza together.

‘I hear you went to the shop, to buy sweetcorn for the topping.’

Louis nods and says, ‘yes, I went to the shop to buy sweetcorn for the topping.’

‘And how was that?’ Louis frowns. ‘How was it, going to the shop?’ Louis’s frown deepens but Dr Angela isn’t put off by this, not like other people can be. ‘I mean,’ she says, ‘did you have any feelings of Anxiety, going outside to the shop?’

Louis hasn’t been outside much lately. It’s something Dr Angela and Martin both agree he needs to work on. He doesn’t like the starkness of the light. He doesn’t like the snatches of icy wind or the flurries of cloud darkening the pavement, then brightening it again.

It was a sunny day when Louis left his flat, flat number four, with Martin to go to the hospital to see Kitty Greene. He’d had to go back to his flat, flat number four, for his sunglasses which made Martin twitch and say, ‘We’ve not got time for this.’

At the hospital, Kitty Greene was in her own side room. A machine breathed for her and another machine alerted the room to her continuing heartbeat. Her mother was there, strangely

motionless in a chair. A wheezy granny was there too. That-Bastard-Kai didn't appear to be anywhere. Louis said as much which made Kitty Greene's granny cluck her tongue.

Louis had never been to hospital before. For Maman, there was no bedside vigil, no goodbye. His focus skidded past the impossible sight of Kitty Greene in bed, to the window. He walked over and closed the curtains.

'No,' Kitty Green's granny wheezed. 'She likes to watch the sunset.'

Louis didn't believe this was true. Kitty Greene had not once asked him to open the roller-blind in the kitchenette. But he suddenly wasn't sure.

'Do you like the sunset, Kitty Greene?'

Kitty Greene's eyelids flickered. Louis was sure this meant No.

'I didn't think so,' he said, stumbling backward, away from Kitty Greene and the hospital bed. His insides sloshed as he turned to face the window. There's a reason why tummies slosh and grumble. When he'd still been at school, Miss Cunning had told him more than once.

'Is there any food?' Louis asked as he clumsily drew the curtains on the reddish sky. Kitty Greene's granny made a choking, coughing sound like she was trying to say his name.

'It's Louis,' he said, to save her any embarrassment. 'It's pronounced Loo-wee because my Maman was French.' Kitty Greene's granny's wrinkly eyes seemed to grow bigger while Kitty Greene's mother's were all wet and lost, like she'd forgotten something and was trying to remember what it was. 'I'd like some food now,' and Louis remembered to say, 'please.'

Martin, who stood by the door, seemed to wake up, but Louis couldn't see how he'd been sleeping, what with Kitty Greene just lying there and Kitty Green's granny clucking her tongue and Kitty Greene's mother now crying with great heaving gulps. And all the other people, strangers, moving in and out and around them.

'You should say goodbye, Louis,' he said, clenching his fist around a used tissue. 'To Kitty.'

'OK, Martin.'

Louis looked at the white metal bed containing Kitty Greene. She lay, eyes closed and still, not looking like Kitty Greene but more like a statue of Kitty Greene. But then Louis had never seen her in bed before; he wasn't allowed to enter her usual bedroom in flat number three. He imagined the bed in flat number three was made of wood, like his bed in his flat, flat number four. He imagined she had a blue duvet, like his duvet, and not all those layers of peach-coloured hospital blankets. The hospital bed looked uncomfortable, surrounded by machines and people.

But then the machines quietened. Louis was suddenly aware of the silence. Even Kitty Greene's mother's sniffing paused. Louis picked at the peach blanket with clumsy fingers, understanding, even though Martin kept glancing at him with wet eyes as though he didn't understand, that Kitty Greene was never coming back to the residential home, to flat number three.

'I don't like the outside,' Louis tells Dr Angela, and she lists all the reasons why going outside is important and reminds him of all the techniques he has to help him keep calm. Louis talks about the moon and Dr Angela smiles, the stripy sunlight coming in through the blinds making her hair look extra glossy. He tells her so. Did he say it already? But she smiles and then fiddles with the wedding ring on her finger as she says, 'Louis, there's something I need to give to you.'

She fiddles with her ring like she did the day she came to see him in his flat, flat number four, even though it was a Sunday and Dr Angela doesn't work on Sundays.

'I wanted to see you, see how you are after,' and here she'd broken off and given a little gasp that watered her eyes, 'Kitty's funeral,' she'd managed.

Louis didn't answer because he didn't know how to answer. Questions like these were hard and Martin had asked him already and hadn't seemed happy when Louis answered: 'The mother cried loudly.'

After a while of quiet sitting, the rainy light coming through Louis's thin curtains making Dr Angela's hair dull, she said, 'It was very sudden, Louis. Her asthma was difficult to manage and...'

But he'd shushed her. Kitty Greene was the only perfect thing Louis had known. And, although dead, she'd stay that way.

Dr Angela clears her throat. 'We found this, when we cleared Kitty's... When we got flat number three ready for Eliza Wishaw. The label says, *Louis*. It's for you, from Kitty Greene.'

Louis takes the neat package, wrapped in metallic paper with silver stars.

'The most distant star that can be seen is Deneb,' he says, 'located in the constellation of Cygnus the Swan.'

Dr Angela nods. 'It's not Christmas yet but you can open it now, if you like.' She raises her penciled brow and gestures in the direction of the parcel.

Louis begins to pick carefully at the sticky-tape. He doesn't get presents very often, and never from a dead person.

'The Deneb star is located between 1400 and 3000 light years from Earth.' Pick, pick. 'Despite the difficulties in pin-pointing a specific distance for the Deneb star, it's the most distant star we can see.'

Unwrapped, Louis rests the present on his lap, a book for him from Kitty Greene.

With a sticky voice, Dr Angela says: 'Oh, it's a great book: *Le Petit Prince*. Do you know it?'

The book's title blurs. "*Tu auras, toi, des étoiles qui savent rire.*"

Dr Angela blinks several times. 'Did you say the star is laughing? My French is a little rusty.'

Louis laughs. 'French is not made of metal.' And then he says, 'Deneb is the most distant star we can see. It is also in the top twenty brightest stars visible. "*J'habiterai dans l'une d'ellesall,*" he adds and makes a promise to himself, to peek out of the window later that night and look for the Deneb star and find Maman there and Kitty Greene, laughing.