

The Fence

Monday

The fence is made of white wooden planks overlapping in such a way that leaves almost no openings for light to penetrate to the other side. The biggest opening is a cut-out branch hole of about five inches in diameter, situated one meter sixty above the ground. It is almost perfectly circular, a white round window overlooking the nursery school playground that lies behind the fence. On the right side of this scene, almost hidden by the frame that is the fence, there is the edge of a dark red brick wall, flanked by a metal rubbish bin. In front of the wall, there is a group of small bushes, completely bare and naked, whose short shadows point north, towards the fence. In the background, there are five swings, two of them smaller and with lower seats, the others bigger. Behind the swings, there is a large flower bed without any flowers, then another white wooden fence. On the left, right at the perimeters of the scene framed by the hole, is a big sand pit filled with yellowish brown mud. A few toy buckets and a shovel lie around. Between the sand pit and the brick wall building, there is an open asphalt space, in the middle of which stand four red bobby cars lined up in a neat row. Beneath them are skewed drawings of blue houses, green moons, yellow cats. In the very foreground, only a meter or so from the fence, there are two big wooden boxes painted flaky blue, closed by iron lids reflecting the sunlight.

Somewhere on the right, a shrill bell rings three times. Soon, shouts and laughter fill the air, and a child comes running from the direction of the brick wall, then two, then three. Others follow at a more leisurely pace, until fourteen children fill the playground. The smallest are tiny, hardly more than toddlers, the tallest, two lankish girls with identical pigtails, seem to be almost twice their size. One of them is a brunette with bouncy curls, she is wearing a red jacket, a red skirt, red leggings and white shoes. The other is dressed in green and blue, her hair is blond and very long. Both look around a little aimlessly before approaching the boxes right underneath the hole in the fence. As they come closer, their chatter becomes intelligible. "I want the long rope," the blond one says, "you had it all of last week and that's unfair." Her voice is loud and high, as if she was singing, especially when she accentuates the last syllable of "unfair". "I'm older," the one with the curls says, "I'll take it." She opens the lid of the left box and takes out a skipping rope with pink handles. The blond girl screws up

her big eyes and frowns, but then she takes out another rope and follows her companion back to the asphalt space, where they start skipping in the middle of a bobby car parade. Their pigtails jump as they jump, whipping back and forth and up and down. A smaller boy painting red matchstick men on the ground puts down his chalk and watches them. He is so tiny that he almost disappears in his thick brown winter coat, with only his eyes peeping out from underneath his woolly hat, as they follow the movements of the jumping pigtails. The rest of his body remains almost motionless. Then, after a minute or two, he turns away and starts walking towards the sand pit where another boy, almost as small as him but dressed less warmly, with red hair, red ears and a red nose, is building a sand castle. The boy in the coat goes around the castle and starts working on it too, digging a moat around the wall and forming a bridge out of the yellow mud. The ginger boy gives him an approving look and keeps on working on his side of the castle. None of them see the squirrel that has hopped into the pit and sits on a neighbouring sand hill, watching the castle grow.

The moat and the outer wall are almost finished as the shrill bell rings again. The children on the asphalt, including the girls with the pigtails, drop whatever they were holding in their hands and run to the right, towards the brick wall, leaving the frame formed by the hole in the fence. The small boys are much slower, and they take the time to smooth their castle's sand wall before they get up and leave. When they are gone, the squirrel approaches the castle, nose first, leaving a shallow trace in the mud. Then it turns away, climbs out of the sand pit and hurries across the asphalt space, over the colourful chalk paintings, to the bare bushes on the left, where it starts digging in the earth below. Its progress is slow, but after half an hour or so, the squirrel hops out again, holding a small round brown something in its claws, darts across the asphalt space and leaves the frame via the sand pit.

Now, nothing stirs anymore. The shadows of the bushes have grown longer, as have those of the swings. The latter are just about to reach the edge of the asphalt space, as the bell rings again, shrill, three times. Soon, the children enter the scene again, but there are fewer of them this time, only eight. The little boys are among them, and they dash over to the sand pit and resume their work. The red-haired one is now working on the castle tower, while the one with the woolly hat keeps on digging the moat, throwing sand over his shoulder as he goes along. They continue until a handful of sand lands in the red-haired boy's face. He spits, rubs his eyes, then he begins to cry. The other children stop playing and stare at the pair in

the sand pit. A ninth person enters the scene from the right, a young woman with straight brown hair, wearing jeans and a white blouse. She bends down to the crying boy, wipes off his face and picks him up. The children resume their play, the boy in the woolly hat picks up his work again. The young woman approaches the big boxes in the foreground and sits down on one of them, the sobbing child in her lap. "Getting better?" she asks, while she is rocking him on her knees. "No," the little one mutters, and then, "I want to go home." She keeps on rocking and begins to hum. Her long hair falls over her left shoulder, disclosing her neck, or at least the part not covered by her blouse. She has freckles on her upper shoulders but they are hardly darker than the fair skin. Her right ear - the one not covered by her hair - is pink from the cold. "Better now?" she asks again, and this time the boy nods. "You want to go back to the sand pit?"

At this moment the bell rings. She puts him on his feet again and he takes her hand. On its back, there are the same light freckles on the same white skin. "Let's go inside," she says and they leave the scene. The remaining children follow. On the fence, an ant street has started forming. The insects crawl up the wooden planks into the hole, where they disappear, a succession of small black dots on a white background.

Tuesday

Behind the hole in the fence, the wind is howling. There is no sun, no shadows on the ground. The swings swing by themselves, their hinges cracking, the bare bushes move back and forth, a green toy bucket rolls across the empty asphalt space. The sand castle on the left is no more than a big heap from which sticks a red toy shovel. In the foreground, on one of the boxes under the fence, lies a piece of light blue paper held in place by a twig. As the wind grows stronger, the twig moves once, twice, then the piece of paper escapes and flies away, to the right, across the asphalt space, until it gets caught in one of the bushes.

The shrill bell rings three times. A kid comes running, then another, then another. There are the lankish girls with the pigtails, wearing identical black coats. Underneath, the blonde one has a pair of jeans covered by colour stains, the one with the curls is wearing her red leggings and white shoes. As soon as they reach the asphalt space, they turn right and run towards the swings, take two of the big ones, those for the big kids, and start swinging. They are being watched by the little red-haired boy who is sitting by the edge of the sand pit, his

ears pink from the cold and the wind. He is wearing nothing but a pair of jeans and a blue jumper. His companion, the other little boy, dressed in his coat, woolly hat and a pair of mittens, is kneeling in the sand pit and examining the heap that used to be their castle. After a minute, he gets up again, jumps out of the sand pit, pulling the red-haired boy along with him. They cross the asphalt space, where a group of girls is playing French skipping, towards the bobby cars, but before they get there a group of older boys claims them for themselves. The little ones continue until they reach the bushes on the far right. The one with the coat kneels down and starts digging in the flowerbed, while the other one breaks a few random twigs and throws them to the ground. It doesn't take long until he finds the light blue piece of paper. He takes it, unfolds it, then drops it as he dropped the twigs. Immediately, the piece of paper is lifted by the wind, and it gets caught in the bushes again, a few meters further down. The red-haired child starts digging, too, and the boys work side by side until the bell rings once again. Then they get up, run towards the right, out of the, followed by twelve laughing, screaming kids.

Not long after they are gone, the sun comes out. It doesn't get less windy, though, and the swings keep on moving by themselves. The twig on which the light blue piece of paper got caught sways to the right and to the left. After a while, the squirrel reappears, hopping through the sand pit, across the asphalt space and into the flowerbed underneath the naked bushes, where it starts digging. After a moment, though, it looks up and starts sniffing. Just above its head, there is the blue piece of paper. The squirrel nudges it two or three times, and suddenly the paper comes loose, falls down, then flies away. This time it is carried further, in the direction of the other white fence in the background, and comes to a halt right beneath one of the small children's swings. The squirrel resumes its work, but after a while it looks up again, sniffs the air, then hops away to the right, towards the brick wall, out of the frame.

Soon afterwards, the sun disappears and the wind starts to howl even louder, almost covering the shrill sound of the bell as it rings again. Six children enter the scene from the right, among them the two girls in their identical rain coats. They immediately turn towards the swings, but this time they are overtaken by a pair of older boys, who take two of the big swings for themselves. The girl with the curls gets the third one, whilst the blonde one is left with one of the baby swings. As the others start swinging higher and higher, she sits there,

staring at them and gnawing on her fingernails. After a while, she gets up again, her gaze wanders across the playground, then she looks down and picks up a light blue something. Her companion stops swinging and calls her over, and they both bend over the piece of paper.

At the same time, the young woman enters the scene from the right. Her straight brown hair is gathered in a high ponytail, disclosing her ears and shoulders. She is wearing a denim jacket and a long brown skirt on which the wind is pulling, revealing the black shoes underneath and a tiny bit of the white skin of her legs. She bends down and picks up the green bucket that has been pushed across the asphalt space by the wind, then she walks over to the sand pit where she takes the red shovel from the castle. She carries both items to the boxes just below the hole in the fence. As she opens one of them to put the toys inside, the two girls come running across the playground. The blonde one, who is still holding the piece of paper, hands it over and says: "It's a letter but we can't read it because it's not in block letters." Her voice is strange and distorted, almost carried away by the wind. The young woman unfolds the piece of paper, her brow furrowed. "I can read all letters," the girl with the curls says, "but she wouldn't let me have it." Then she falls quiet and looks up. The young woman bites her lip as she is reading, then she says: "Thank you, I think it was for me anyway." The girl with the curls opens her mouth, but she doesn't say anything. "Why don't you two go back to the others?" the young woman asks and they do. She sits down on one of the boxes and stares at the letter for quite a while. The freckles on the back of her hands are visible again; she has some behind her ears as well, and on the outer side of her lower arms. There is a thin silver ring on her left pinky finger, which she turns and turns with the thumb of the same hand. She doesn't get up until the bell rings and the children run away, to the right, out of the frame. She checks the boxes one last time, then she leaves, too. As she passes the metal bin next to the brick wall, she drops the light blue letter inside.

The ant street on the white fence is still moving, a succession of dark dots on a white background. Some of the dots remain motionless though, like small spots of dirt, crushed insects in a neat, straight line.

Wednesday

The scene behind the hole in the fence is covered in greyish fog. The swings in the background are vague silhouettes, and the paintings on the asphalt space appear pale and colourless. Everything is silent too, the bushes on the right don't move at all. As the shrill bell rings three times, it is the first sound in minutes. The children enter the scene, two, three, fourteen, they are quieter too, their voices and laughter muffled by the fog and their thick shawls and jackets. The lankish girls appear, they are wearing matching overalls and headbands that keep their pigtails away from their faces. They look pale, almost as grey as everything else, as they kneel down in the middle of the playground with pieces of chalk of unrecognizable colour in their hands. Whatever they are drawing is hidden by the blonde girl's back, who is kneeling in front of it, her face turned away from the fence. A couple of other children have started chasing each other, but they stay well away from the painting. After a while, the blonde girl moves to the side and now her work becomes visible. It is a sequence of big squares with numbers in them, a sort of race course leading straight away from the fence. The first big square is labeled one, in red, then follows a blue two, a green three, a purple four, then the colours become too pale to be recognizable. The blonde girl puts her chalk down, gets up from the floor and positions herself in front of the first square. She jumps into it on her right leg, then into the second square, into the third, the fourth, changing legs on every other leap. The girl with the curls, who has been working on the far end, gets up and starts jumping too. When they both have reached the end, they return by jumping backwards, alternating between left and right leg as they go. The children playing tag gather in a circle to watch them. Soon, they are jumping too, and a queue is forming at both ends of the race course. The only kids not taking part are the two little boys, who instead approach the swings at the far end of the playground. They each sit down on one of the baby seats and start swinging, mere shadows half hidden by the fog.

The bell rings three times and the children leave the scene, some of them still hopping on one leg. Everything becomes quiet again. After a while, the fog begins to lift, the colour of number five reveals itself – it's pink –, the same for the yellow six and the orange seven. The contours of the swings become sharper and sharper, the fence behind them is visible again. Soon, rain drops start dripping, only a few at first, splattering the asphalt ground, then more and more. They take away the red one, the blue two, the green three, and fill the silence

with a deep swooshing noise. Then, after a while, the rain stops and the sun appears, shedding light on the colourful rivers that used to be the paintings on the asphalt ground.

The bell rings again and seven children exit, all of them wearing wellies. The brown-haired young woman follows them with a cloth in her hand. She approaches the swings and dries each of the seats, going from the right to the left, then she returns to the asphalt space and talks to the girls, who stand where their race course used to be. They follow her to one of the boxes in the foreground and the young woman gives them another pack of coloured chalk sticks. "I'm not sure whether they work on wet ground," she says, but the girls have already turned their backs and return to the middle of the asphalt space to try and save whatever is left of their work. The young woman watches them for a while. She is wearing a black rain jacket, blue jeans, black boots; her hair is open and adorned with three small braided strands. She takes out a phone, sits down on one of the boxes and starts typing. After a minute or so, her phone beeps, she reads, types, then the phone beeps again. With each beep, the corners of her mouth lift a bit more. Her cheeks become pink under the freckles. The sun disappears.

Eleven beeps later, the bell rings again. The children's wellies leave colourful tracks as they run away, out of the scene. The young woman puts her phone back into her pocket. As she gets up, it starts raining again, a few drops at first, then a deluge. She pulls her hood over her head and hurries across the asphalt space to pick up the chalk left behind by the girls, then she runs towards the sand pit and collects a heap of buckets and shovels. A pair of mittens lies on the ground, she gathers them too. Finally, she returns to the flaky blue boxes in the foreground and puts the chalk, the shovels and the buckets inside, while keeping the mittens in her hands. A man appears on the right side of the scene, next to the metallic bin, opposite the direction in which she is looking. He is tall and broad-shouldered; his face is mostly hidden by the hood that he has pulled over his head. The young woman turns around and stops dead as she sees him. He takes a few steps towards her. Then she laughs a high, clear laugh. "What on earth are you doing here in this weather?" she asks. He keeps on walking towards her, his answer is muffled by the rain and the distance. "You're crazy, you know," she replies and takes a few steps forward, so that they meet in the middle of the asphalt space. His hands wrap around her waist, she takes the mittens into her right hand and

touches his face with the left. Whatever she says is unintelligible, but her laughter is not. Then they turn around and leave the playground.

On the white fence, more crushed ants have joined the straight line of their dead fellow insects. Those who have survived are washed away by the incessant rain.

Thursday

Behind the hole in the fence, a fine layer of frost covers the bushes and the seats of the swings. The red bobby cars have got white seats, and the puddle in the middle of the asphalt space has turned into ice. In the foreground, on one of the boxes, lies a dark red heap with a light blue piece of paper next to it, held in place by a twig. The glistening frost underneath is red too, a circular stain on the metal lid.

The shrill bell rings three times and the children come running from the direction of the brick wall, screaming cheerfully as they see the icy patch on the asphalt. Soon, all fourteen of them are sliding around, on their feet, their knees, even their backsides; their boots are scratching deep tracks into the solid surface. The little red-haired boy with his pink nose and ears falls down, but he gets up again, laughing like the others. The older girls, dressed in white and blue snow suits and wellies, are the first ones to leave the ice. They watch the other children for a bit, then they walk towards the fence in the foreground. The blonde one opens one of the blue boxes, the one on the right, but the one with the curly hair taps onto her back and points towards the red something lying on the other box. They come closer and scrutinize it, but without touching it. "Shall we go get someone?" the blonde girl asks, but the other shakes her head and picks up the blue piece of paper from underneath the twig. "Let me take this first. I want to read it this time." The blonde one bites her lip but doesn't say anything as her companion puts the paper into the pocket of her snow suit. Then she looks at the red heap again and touches it ever so slightly with her right index finger. "That is disgusting!" she says, accentuating the second-to-last syllable as she holds up her finger. The tip is red, too. The girl with the curls takes her by the arm and pulls her towards the red brick wall. They disappear from the frame, unnoticed by the other children, who keep on sliding. The two little boys take two of the bobby cars and start driving, swirling in zigzag lines across the asphalt space, absolutely out of control. After a few minutes, the girls reappear, followed by the brown-haired young woman and an older lady with short grey hair and rimless

glasses. They are wearing neither coats nor boots, just jeans, jumpers and brown slippers. They approach the boxes and bend down to the red something. None of them touches it. "That's horrible," the younger woman says. Her voice sounds soft and shaky. "Do you think it's real?" – "I hope not," the older one replies, "but I will definitely call the police." She turns to the girls who are standing a few meters away, their faces blank and pale. "Have you two seen anything else?" They shake their heads vividly, then look away. The girl with the curls has buried her hand in the pocket of her snow suit. "Let's send the children inside," the older woman says and takes out a phone. The younger one returns to the children on the ice and ushers them away. The little boys pout as they are made to get off their bobby cars, but then they follow her to the brick wall, out of the frame. The older woman leaves too, while speaking on the phone, leaving the red something on the blue box behind.

A few moments later, the sun breaks through and everything starts to sparkle, the ground, the bushes, the seats of the swings. The red heap on the box is glistening too. A squirrel appears from the left, leaving tiny tracks in the frost covering the sand pit, and jumps onto the icy patch. It sniffs the air for a bit, then it turns towards the boxes and climbs onto the one on the left. Its nose approaches the red heap, but then it recoils and jumps down again, hurries across the playground and climbs over the fence behind the swings.

After another while, the two women enter the scene again, followed by a tall, bald man in a green uniform. They form a circle around the box with the red something, the man takes out a camera and starts taking pictures. When he is done, the younger woman bends down to the red heap. "Do you think it's real," she asks. The man takes out a transparent plastic bag. "I think so," he replies. "Not human, though. I'd say a beef heart." – "Thank goodness," the older woman says, deep furrows on her forehead. "But I think we should keep the children inside anyway." The man picks up the red something and puts it into the bag. "That might be for the best. I will let you know once we have examined this." Both women nod. They follow him back to the brick wall, out of sight. What remains is the dark red spot on the metal lid. The sun disappears.

Shortly afterwards, the young woman enters the scene again, carrying a piece of cloth and a spray bottle in her hands. She kneels down, stuffs her hair into the back of her violet jumper, and starts rubbing away the stain. The freckles on the back of her hand stand out on her pale skin, there is a thin red line on her left pinky finger. Suddenly, a snow flake lands on her

jumper. A second one, a third one. Soon, her brown hair and the violet fabric are covered by an irregular white pattern. She pulls the hood over her hair and continues scrubbing.

There is not a single living ant crawling around the hole in the fence. Instead, the white wood is plastered by black spots. As the snow fall becomes heavier, flakes begin sticking on the planks, covering the insect cadavers one by one.

Friday

A thick layer of snow has blanketed everything behind the hole in the fence. The bushes are no more than a row of white heaps, with only a few naked twigs breaking through, the ground is completely covered, the bobby cars have all but disappeared. The bell rings three times. Fourteen children come storming onto the playground, dressed in thick, colourful snow suits. One of the little boys, with his red hair barely visible under his green hood, picks up a bit of snow, forms it into a ball and throws it at another child. Soon, snow is flying into every direction. Two boys in orange chase each other around the swings, each holding an armful of snow, their boots leaving deep tracks. Their laughter rings across the playground, high and piercing. The tall girls are there, too, wearing their blue and white snow suits and gloves. They have started forming a big heap underneath one of the baby swings, but as the boys in orange start a snow fight over their heads, the girls get up, shielding their faces, and move away. They shake the snow from their pig tails, then they approach the sand pit on the left. The sand hills and valleys have disappeared, too. The blonde girl starts forming another heap, while the one with the curls brings more snow from other areas of the pit. As the heap grows, the girls have to move away further and further to find fresh building material. Finally, only one hill, the biggest one, is left on the far end of the pit. The girl with the curls approaches it and starts shoveling, but then she stops, turns around and says something to her companion. The blonde girl gets up and joins her. A shriek, then she backs off, jumps out of the sand pit and runs away, towards the brick wall. Some of the other children drop their snow balls and gather around the edge of the pit, their backs blocking the view on what is inside. The red-haired boy steps forward and starts shoveling. The girl with the curls joins him. Then the blonde one reappears, followed by the grey-haired woman. On seeing her, the children surrounding the sand pit step back. Now the hill becomes visible. Where the red-haired boy and the girl with the curls have dug, something has appeared, something big, something violet, covered by an irregular white snow pattern.

On the fence in the foreground, the ant cadavers have disappeared with the snow. The wooden planks remain white and spotless with the exception of the cut-out opening, about five inches in diameter, that tiny window, that perfectly circular gaping hole.