

Class Photo

Youth theatre · 10-character play · 5 women, 3 men, 2 either · 60 min · Intermediate · Ages 12+

The day before the bac, France's big final exams, the ten students in the smallest class at their high school finally get their class photo. Rose, who was there the day it was taken, isn't in it; Inès, who was absent that day, is. As the day goes on, more faces fade from the print, and the ten stay in their classroom until the school locks up, to work out what this photo is showing them.

Room 12 of a small high school in a town on the banks of the Loire, June 15th, from ten in the morning to six in the evening, the present day.

Casting

ROSE (Female role, Teen) 17, in the class, has sat next to Lou since their first year.

LOU (Female role, Teen) 17, in the class, lives on the same street as Rose.

SAM (No gender marker, Teen) 17, in the class, picked up the photo from the photographer this morning.

HUGO (Male role, Teen) 17, in the class, has told everyone he's moving to Paris after the bac.

CLARA (Female role, Teen) 17, in the class, has wanted to study medicine since first year.

INÈS (Female role, Teen) 16, in the class, was absent the day the photo was taken, back in May.

ALMA (Female role, Teen) 17, in the class, runs the class group chat.

MALIK (Male role, Teen) 17, in the class, arrives at school without having slept.

ADAM (Male role, Teen) 17, in the class, has been falling asleep in lessons since spring.

CHARLIE (No gender marker, Teen) 16, in the class, draws the linden tree in the schoolyard from the window every day.

ACT ONE: TEN O'CLOCK

SCENE 1: THE ENVELOPE

(Room 12, the last day. The chairs are upside down on the desks, except for a few. Through the window, the schoolyard and a tall linden tree. Clara is studying, flashcards spread out in front of her. Charlie sits at the window, drawing, a sketchbook balanced on one knee. Adam is asleep, head on his arms. Alma is typing on her phone. Malik checks the time.)

ALMA. The group chat says Sam's on the way with the photo.

CLARA. The group chat says a lot of things.

ALMA. The group chat is always right. I am the group chat.

MALIK. A month. He took a month to develop ten faces.

CLARA. Mercier is eighty years old, Malik. He develops everything by hand, in his basement.

MALIK. He could try developing in this century.

(Rose and Lou come in together. Lou is carrying two coffees; she hands one to Rose.)

LOU. Did we miss anything?

ALMA. Adam's been asleep since eight. That's it.

ROSE. He's been dead on his feet since Easter.

ADAM. I'm not asleep. I'm studying. Very deeply.

LOU. Studying what?

ADAM. The inside of my eyelids.

(Hugo runs in and does a lap of the room, arms in the air.)

HUGO. Last day! Last day of my life in this room! I'd like a minute of silence for Room 12.

CLARA. Granted. Starting now.

HUGO. Clara, you're studying on the last day?

CLARA. The bac starts tomorrow, Hugo. Tomorrow, eight a.m.

HUGO. Exactly. It's too late to study. Now's the time to live.

CLARA. Go live somewhere else.

(Hugo goes to the window and looks over Charlie's shoulder.)

HUGO. The tree again?

CHARLIE. Always the tree.

HUGO. How many times have you drawn it?

CHARLIE. Five hundred and eight. One a day since first year, except weekends and vacations.

HUGO. And has it changed?

CHARLIE. Every day.

(Sam comes in, clutching a big brown paper envelope.)

SAM. It's here.

ALMA. Told you.

SAM. Mercier was standing outside his shop at eight, holding the envelope, like he was waiting for me. He handed it over and said, "It's early, as always."

MALIK. Early? We took it on May 12th.

SAM. That's what I told him. He just smiled and shut the door.

LOU. At his age, a month is early.

ROSE. Open it.

SAM. Wait. First, I have a proposal.

HUGO. No.

SAM. You don't even know what it is.

HUGO. It's a Sam proposal on the last day. There's going to be a chart to fill in, with colors.

SAM. Ten years from now, June 15th, all ten of us meet up. On the steps, in front of the linden. And we take the photo again. Same spots, same faces.

(A pause.)

ADAM. In ten years, I'll have slept.

ALMA. I'm in. I'm setting a reminder.

CLARA. In ten years I'll be at the hospital, Sam. Doctors don't take June 15th off for a photo.

SAM. You'll take the day.

CLARA. We'll see.

MALIK. And what if we've got nothing left to say to each other?

SAM. Then we'll say we've got nothing left to say. That's a conversation.

LOU. Rose and I will come together. Right, Rose?

(Rose drinks her coffee.)

ROSE. Open the envelope, Sam.

(Sam opens the envelope and pulls out a large print. The others crowd around, except Adam. Silence.)

HUGO. Oh. We all have Monday faces.

ALMA. Malik, your eyes are closed.

MALIK. My eyes aren't closed. I'm looking at the sun.

ALMA. With your eyes closed.

MALIK. Be glad I'm in focus. At Mercier's, the exposure takes a whole second. If you move, you come out blurry. Two years ago, Hugo sneezed and came out as a ghost.

HUGO. A really good-looking ghost.

LOU. Wait. Where's Rose?

CLARA. Next to you. Front row, on the right.

LOU. On my right, there's the wall.

(They all lean over the photo. Rose doesn't move.)

SAM. No. Rose was there. I remember, Mercier asked her to take off her sunglasses.

ROSE. I took them off.

LOU. You were right there, squished against me. You stepped on my foot right

when he took it. I yelled.

MALIK. You're not yelling in the photo. Your mouth is closed. You're smiling.

LOU. I'm not smiling. My foot hurts.

HUGO. Mercier cropped her out. He framed it too tight.

CLARA. Nothing's cropped. Look: the edge of the step, the gutter, it's all there. There's room for someone, and nobody in it.

ALMA. People do that, though, right? Erase someone from a photo?

MALIK. Not at Mercier's. He has an enlarger from 1970 and a red light bulb. He doesn't erase anything. He doesn't even know what that means.

ADAM. Who disappeared?

LOU. Rose.

(Adam lifts his head and looks at Rose.)

ADAM. She's right there.

LOU. Not in the photo.

ADAM. Oh. I'd rather not be in the photo, personally. Can we swap?

ROSE. It's a mistake. He messed something up in his basement. It's no big deal.

LOU. No big deal? It's the class photo, Rose. The last one.

ROSE. I'm here, Lou. Look at me. I'm here, for real, with a coffee.

(Rose laughs. Lou doesn't.)

ROSE. Okay. I'm going to empty my locker, and then I'm going home to study.

SAM. Wait. Mercier can redo it. I'll call him.

ROSE. Leave it, Sam. Nobody ever looks at class photos. You stick them in a drawer and forget about them.

(Rose picks up her bag. Before she reaches the door, it opens.)

SCENE 2: THE FLU

(Inès comes in, out of breath, a croissant in her hand.)

INÈS. I know, I know. The bus. It stopped to let a herd of cows cross. I'm not making it up, there were actual cows.

CLARA. Take the train, like me. Cows don't cross train tracks.

INÈS. The train is for people who get up at six, Clara. Do you have the photo?

SAM. We have it.

INÈS. I'm not in it anyway. On May 12th I had the flu. Show me anyway, I want to see your faces.

(Sam hands her the print. Inès looks. She stops chewing.)

INÈS. Who's that, in the second row, between Adam and Charlie?

HUGO. That's you.

INÈS. That's not me. I wasn't there.

HUGO. It's your face. Your eyebrows. Nobody else has those eyebrows.

INÈS. I was in bed with a raging fever. My mom wrote a note.

CLARA. You had the flu, on May 12th?

INÈS. Yes. Why?

CLARA. No reason.

INÈS. And that green coat, I don't own it. I've never had a green coat in my life. Green doesn't suit me.

ALMA. It suits you in the photo.

INÈS. That's not the point, Alma.

LOU. So Rose was there, and she isn't in it. And Inès wasn't there, and she is.

ADAM. They swapped. I asked first.

(Charlie comes over, takes the photo from Inès, looks at it for a long time, then looks out the window.)

CHARLIE. The branch.

SAM. What branch?

CHARLIE. The big branch on the linden, on the left. They cut it off in March, after the storm. I've drawn it cut off every day since. In the photo, it's there.

MALIK. Mercier took the photo in May. The branch was already gone in May.

CHARLIE. Yes. And it's there. Thicker than before.

HUGO. He used an old background. Photographers do that. They keep a sky, a tree, and stick the people in front.

MALIK. I just told you, he doesn't stick anything anywhere.

HUGO. So you've got a better explanation, Malik?

MALIK. A double exposure. He used a plate that had already been exposed. There was an old picture on it, with the branch, and ours landed on top.

CLARA. And the old picture had Inès in it? In a green coat?

(Malik doesn't answer.)

ALMA. Don't you think we look old?

HUGO. It's the paper. Mercier's paper makes everyone look old. My grandma looks a hundred in her wedding photo.

ALMA. Your grandma's a hundred?

HUGO. Ninety-two. Close enough.

ALMA. Hang on, I'll take a picture. I'll zoom in and post it in the chat.

(Alma photographs the print with her phone and looks at the screen.)

ALMA. It's white.

INÈS. What?

ALMA. On the screen. Totally white. Like I took a picture of a window in full sun.

MALIK. The paper's shiny. Tilt it.

(Alma tilts the print and tries again. She looks at the screen.)

ALMA. White. You can see the desk, my hand, the edge of the paper. And inside, nothing.

HUGO. Your phone is embarrassed by us.

(Malik turns the print over and reads the back.)

MALIK. There's a stamp. "Studio Mercier. Ten Years. June 15th."

SAM. June 15th is today. It's the day he gave it to me.

LOU. And "Ten Years"?

CLARA. He's been doing the school photos for ten years. He told the principal on picture day. He wanted a cake.

HUGO. Or he has the mental age of a ten-year-old and he's pranking us.

INÈS. It's not a prank. A photo that shows someone who wasn't there is a sign. My grandma says a photo that lies brings bad luck for a whole year.

MALIK. A photo doesn't lie, Inès. It's light on paper. Light hits it, the paper goes dark. That's it.

INÈS. So the light is lying.

ALMA. Rose, you left the group chat this morning.

ROSE. What?

ALMA. The class chat. "Rose left the group." Six twelve a.m.

ROSE. I hit the wrong button. I meant to mute it, I had forty messages about tomorrow's schedule.

ALMA. At six twelve?

ROSE. I couldn't sleep. Nobody sleeps the night before the bac.

ADAM. I do.

ALMA. I'm adding you back.

ROSE. Later.

(A pause. Lou looks at Rose.)

HUGO. Okay. Somebody in this room did this. Swap the real photo for a fake, take Rose out, put Inès in a ridiculous coat. It's a last-day prank, and honestly, it's a good one. Who?

LOU. Sam had the envelope.

SAM. It's been under my arm since eight. I didn't open it. Mercier taped it shut, you saw the tape.

HUGO. Malik knows how to photoshop stuff. He made the poster for the end-of-year party.

MALIK. I haven't slept in two days, Hugo. I don't have the energy for a prank.

LOU. Why aren't you sleeping?

MALIK. Same reason as Rose. The night before the bac.

CLARA. I'm going home. It's a photographer's mistake, Sam will get it redone, and tomorrow we have a four-hour exam. I still have two chapters.

LOU. You know your chapters by heart.

CLARA. That's why I'm going over them.

(Clara gathers up her flashcards. Rose slings her bag back on her shoulder.)

ROSE. I'll walk down with you, Clara.

LOU. Stay.

ROSE. Lou.

LOU. Until we figure this out, you stay. You owe me that much. Three years sitting next to you, and twelve years on the same street.

(A pause. Rose puts her bag down. Clara, at the door, stops, then comes back and sits down.)

SCENE 3: TEN YEARS FROM NOW

(Sam has a phone pressed to one ear. The others are scattered around the room. The photo is lying on the teacher's desk.)

SAM. It just rings and rings. He doesn't have voicemail.

HUGO. He doesn't have a phone, Sam. He has a drum and smoke signals.

INÈS. We're not going to sit here all day staring at a photo.

SAM. No. We're going to play a game.

HUGO. No.

SAM. One round, and then you can leave. "In ten years, I'll be..." Everybody finishes the sentence. For the reunion photo. That way we'll know who we're waiting for.

ADAM. In ten years, I'll have slept eight hours. Once.

SAM. That's a start. Clara?

CLARA. In ten years, I'll be a cardiology resident, in Lyon, in my last year. I'll have a studio apartment near the hospital and a bike.

HUGO. Have you picked out the curtains?

CLARA. White.

HUGO. Obviously.

SAM. Inès?

INÈS. On a stage. Or in the audience, clapping for somebody else. Either one is good.

CLARA. Those aren't the same thing.

INÈS. I know, Clara. Thanks.

SAM. Malik?

MALIK. I don't know about ten years. I know about tonight. Tonight is already a lot.

ALMA. What's happening tonight?

MALIK. Nothing. The bac tomorrow. Ask someone else.

SAM. Alma?

ALMA. Me? I don't know. Here, probably. There's always someone who stays, and runs the reunion group chat. I'll be right here, waiting for you guys to answer.

INÈS. You're already waiting.

ALMA. I'm not waiting for anyone.

INÈS. I didn't say anyone's name.

SAM. Charlie?

CHARLIE. Far away.

HUGO. Far away where?

CHARLIE. Far away. That's enough of an address.

SAM. Far away, but back on the steps on June 15th.

CHARLIE. We'll see.

SAM. Lou?

LOU. Easy. In ten years, Rose and I still live on the same street, but on the other side of the bridge, in a house with a leaky roof. We have two dogs called May and June, and we walk to your photo. Right, Rose?

(Rose looks out the window.)

LOU. Rose?

ROSE. Ask Hugo.

(A pause.)

HUGO. What about you, Sam? You ask all the questions, but you never answer.

SAM. Me? On the steps, in front of the linden, with the camera. Waiting for you all.

HUGO. And besides that?

SAM. That's already a pretty good plan.

HUGO. Okay. My turn. In ten years, I'm in Paris. I've got an apartment with a view over the rooftops and an elevator that actually works. I never take the cow bus again. And I never set foot in this town again. Ever. Not even for your photo, Sam. Sorry.

(A click, like a camera shutter. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Everyone looks up.)

ADAM. Did you hear that?

INÈS. The light. It went down.

MALIK. It's the electrics. This school is ancient, the fuses blow all the time.

CLARA. Fuses don't make that sound.

(Lou goes over to the desk and looks at the photo. She says nothing.)

SAM. Lou?

LOU. Hugo. Where were you in the photo?

HUGO. Back row, in the middle. I'm the tallest, I'm always in the middle.

LOU. In the back row, there's nobody in the middle anymore.

(Hugo laughs, comes over and picks up the photo. He stops laughing.)

HUGO. What is this?

ALMA. You were in it. Five minutes ago you were in it, I saw you. Your mouth was open, like always.

CHARLIE. You just said it. You just said you wouldn't come, and the photo heard you.

HUGO. A photo can't hear anything.

INÈS. I told you. It's bad luck.

MALIK. No. There has to be an explanation.

HUGO. Then find it, Malik. Find it fast.

ROSE. Say the opposite.

HUGO. What?

ROSE. You just said you wouldn't come. Say the opposite, and look.

(Hugo turns toward the desk.)

HUGO. I'll come. In ten years, I'll come to your photo, Sam. I'll bring flowers and a cake. There. I'll come.

(Nothing. Lou looks at the photo.)

LOU. Nothing. Still nobody in the middle.

HUGO. But I said it. I said it loud.

CLARA. You said it. That's all you did.

(Hugo puts the photo down on the desk, face down, and steps back.)

ROSE. I told you to stick it in a drawer.

(Blackout.)

ACT TWO: TWO O'CLOCK

SCENE 1: THE EXPERIMENT

(The same room, early afternoon. Sandwich wrappers on the desks. The photo is lying on the teacher's desk, face up. Nobody has gone home. Hugo isn't in the room. Charlie is at the window.)

INÈS. Is he still on the steps?

CHARLIE. Still. He hasn't moved since lunch. He's tossing pebbles into the planter.

ALMA. Does he get any in?

CHARLIE. Not one.

(Sam runs in.)

SAM. The studio's closed. The shutter's down, there isn't even a note on the door. The lady next door says she hasn't seen him since this morning.

MALIK. Then we do it without him. We do it properly, step by step. Hypothesis: the photo changes when somebody says they won't come to the reunion. We test it. We need a volunteer.

ADAM. Me.

CLARA. You never volunteer.

ADAM. If I disappear from the photo, I get to go home and sleep. It's a win-win.

MALIK. Stand in front of the desk. Say exactly what Hugo said. Clara, you watch the photo, and you don't take your eyes off it.

(Adam stands in front of the desk. Clara leans over the photo.)

ADAM. In ten years, I never set foot in this town again. Not even for your photo, Sam. Sorry.

(Nothing. A pause.)

CLARA. You're still there. Second row, next to Inès.

ADAM. Louder, maybe. Hugo said it loud.

MALIK. Try it.

ADAM. I'm not coming! Never! I swear on my turtle's life!

(Nothing.)

CLARA. Still there. You actually look happy.

ADAM. I don't even have a turtle.

INÈS. My turn. I'm better at this. I did three years of drama.

(Inès takes Adam's place, closes her eyes and throws her arms wide.)

INÈS. I, Inès, before you all, do solemnly declare that on June 15th, ten years from now, I shall be elsewhere. Very far away. And I shall not think of you for one single second.

(Nothing.)

CLARA. Nothing. You're still there, in your green coat.

INÈS. That was really well acted, though.

SAM. It was too well acted.

MALIK. So it's not the sentence. It's not the voice either. Maybe it's the moment, the time of day, the light in the room.

CHARLIE. Or maybe Hugo meant it.

MALIK. What?

CHARLIE. Adam doesn't mean it. Neither does Inès. They're acting. This morning, Hugo wasn't acting. He meant it. It was true.

MALIK. You're telling me we have a photo that knows when someone's telling the truth.

CHARLIE. I'm telling you what we saw. This morning Hugo said the opposite, loud, with flowers and a cake. Nothing happened then either. Because that wasn't true either. Got a better idea?

(Malik opens his mouth, then closes it again.)

ADAM. Mine was a lie. That's the truth. I'll come. Even on three hours of sleep, I'll come.

CLARA. But why was it true for Hugo? Paris isn't the end of the world. There are trains.

SAM. He didn't want to come. That's all. He never wanted this reunion. He's made fun of everything I've suggested since first year.

ALMA. He makes fun of everybody, Sam. It doesn't mean anything.

SAM. This morning, it meant something.

(A pause. Lou turns toward Rose.)

LOU. What about Rose?

ROSE. What about Rose?

LOU. You didn't say anything. You didn't swear anything. And you haven't been in the photo since this morning. Since before we even opened it.

CLARA. She's right. If the photo only takes what's true, and it showed up without Rose, then Rose had already decided something. Before today.

ROSE. Or the photo's broken. Or Mercier's crazy. Or I hate photos. Or in ten years I'm a star and I don't have time to come see you all on some steps.

ALMA. Six twelve.

ROSE. Enough with your six twelve, Alma.

ALMA. You left the chat at six twelve, and this morning you're not in the photo. I'm just putting the two things side by side.

ROSE. Stop looking at me like that. All of you.

(Rose goes to the window, next to Charlie.)

ROSE. Is he still throwing his pebbles?

CHARLIE. Still.

SAM. I'll go get him.

CHARLIE. Leave it. He'll come back when he runs out of pebbles.

ADAM. We can't see anything anyway. We're tiny in this photo, and phones just turn it white. We've got ant heads. We need a magnifying glass. There's the big one in the physics lab, the one with the wooden handle.

CLARA. The lab's locked.

ADAM. Not the back window.

(Adam goes out. Malik's phone buzzes. Malik looks at the screen.)

MALIK. I'll be right back.

ALMA. Malik?

MALIK. I'll be right back, Alma.

(Malik goes out. Alma watches the door.)

SCENE 2: THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

(Adam comes in with a big wooden-handled magnifying glass. One leg of his pants is ripped at the knee.)

ADAM. The back window was higher than I remembered.

SAM. Did you hurt yourself?

ADAM. My pants got hurt. I'm fine. Who's first?

CLARA. Give it here.

(Clara takes the magnifying glass and leans over the photo. The others wait.)

CLARA. I'm in the front row. I'm wearing a white coat. There's a badge on it, with a blue stripe.

INÈS. A hospital coat?

CLARA. Yes. A real one, with the badge.

ALMA. So it works out. Everything you planned, it all works out.

CLARA. Yes. That's good.

(A pause. Clara keeps looking.)

CLARA. So it's already done, then. It's all already done.

INÈS. What did you want? To see yourself as an astronaut?

CLARA. Nothing. I didn't want anything. Here, your turn.

(Clara hands the magnifying glass to Inès.)

INÈS. Green coat, seen it. And my hair's short. Really short. I will never cut my hair. Never. I swore that when I was eight, after my aunt cut it off while I was asleep.

SAM. It looks good on you.

INÈS. I look like a hedgehog who made it big.

(Inès passes the glass to Alma. Alma searches for a moment.)

ALMA. I'm in the back row, on the right.

INÈS. Next to who?

ALMA. Malik.

INÈS. Well, well, well.

ALMA. We're in the back row. In the back row you're always next to somebody.

INÈS. In the back row there's Hugo, you and Malik. You could have stood on the other side of Hugo. And you're both laughing.

ALMA. Everybody laughs in photos.

INÈS. Not like that. He's got his head turned toward you.

ALMA. He's looking at the sun. He's always looking at the sun.

(Malik comes in, phone in hand. Alma puts the magnifying glass down on the photo.)

ALMA. Malik. Come and look at yourself.

MALIK. I don't feel like looking at myself.

ALMA. Come anyway.

(Malik comes over, takes the glass and looks. A long pause.)

MALIK. I'm smiling.

ALMA. Told you.

MALIK. In the photo, I'm smiling. I never smile in photos. I don't like my teeth.

LOU. Who was that on the phone?

MALIK. My mom. She wanted to know if I'd eaten.

CLARA. And have you?

MALIK. She's having surgery tomorrow night. Her heart. We found out ten days ago, and I spent last night at the hospital with her, because my dad doesn't get here till tomorrow. She told me to go to school, pick up the photo, laugh with you guys. She said, "I want a picture where you're laughing."

(A pause.)

MALIK. And here I am, smiling. In ten years, or whenever it is, I'm smiling like an idiot.

CLARA. Malik, a photo can't know whether...

MALIK. I know, Clara. I know everything you're going to say. Just let me have it anyway.

(Malik holds on to the glass for a moment, then hands it to Charlie.)

CHARLIE. I'm next to Inès. I've got a bag. A big backpack, with a sleeping mat rolled up on top, and hiking boots. Like someone coming back from very far away.

SAM. So you come back. For the photo, you come back.

CHARLIE. Looks like it.

(Charlie puts down the glass and goes back to the window. Sam holds the glass out to Rose.)

SAM. Rose? Want to look?

ROSE. Look at what? I'm not in it. There's nothing for me to find.

(Lou takes the glass and looks at the space beside her own image.)

LOU. There's nothing. Not even a shadow. Just the wall, and a crack in the plaster.

ROSE. Lou, stop.

LOU. I'm looking, Rose. I'm just looking.

(Hugo comes in, hands in his pockets, and goes to sit at the back, without looking at anyone.)

SAM. You're back.

HUGO. I ran out of pebbles.

ADAM. What about me? Nobody lets me look. I'm the one who ripped my pants.

(Lou gives him the glass. Adam looks. He leans in closer, then closer still.)

ADAM. I'm carrying someone on my shoulders.

ALMA. Who?

ADAM. A little girl. With a yellow hair clip. She's pulling my ears.

INÈS. You have a kid? In ten years, Adam has a kid!

ADAM. No. She has Jade's eyes. Exactly. She has the same little mark, right here, above her eyebrow.

HUGO. Who's Jade?

ADAM. My sister.

LOU. You have a sister?

ADAM. For two months. She was born in April. My mom works nights at the clinic, and Jade doesn't sleep at night, and there's nobody else at home, so I'm the one who gets up. That's why I sleep in class.

HUGO. You never told us anything.

ADAM. You never asked me anything. You just laughed. Adam's asleep, Adam's snoring, Adam's drooling on his test.

(A pause.)

ADAM. In the photo, how old is she? Eight? Nine?

(Nobody answers. Adam looks again.)

ADAM. Ten. She's ten.

SCENE 3: THE BACK OF THE PHOTO

(Clara takes the photo from Adam and turns it over. She reads the back.)

CLARA. "Ten Years. June 15th." It doesn't say May 12th. Anywhere. On May 12th, Inès wasn't there, and she's in it.

(Clara looks up at Inès.)

CLARA. And you didn't have the flu.

INÈS. Yes, I did.

CLARA. I saw you at the station. That day, at seven, I was waiting for my train, and you were on the other platform, in a black dress with a folder under your arm. The platform for the Lyon train. You didn't see me.

INÈS. You've got the wrong person.

CLARA. Nobody else has those eyebrows. Hugo said so.

(A pause. Inès sits down on a desk.)

INÈS. An audition. A drama school, in Lyon. They take twelve people a year. I waited four hours in a hallway full of people doing voice exercises against the wall. I did my piece. Two minutes. A woman said "thank you," just "thank you," without looking up. And that night I got a message. No.

ALMA. Why didn't you tell us?

INÈS. Because if I said I'd gone, I'd also have to say it was a no. The flu was simpler. Everybody's had the flu. Nobody asks you how the flu went.

SAM. But you're in the photo.

INÈS. I wasn't there, and I'm in it. With short hair.

CLARA. Because it's not the photo from May.

(Silence.)

CLARA. Inès wasn't there in May. The branch on the linden has grown back, and Charlie saw it cut off this morning. The girl on Adam's shoulders is ten. And on the back it says "Ten Years. June 15th."

SAM. "It's early, as always."

CLARA. It's not our class photo. It's yours, Sam. The one you want to take. Ten years from now, June 15th, on the steps.

(A pause.)

ADAM. It's us. In ten years.

CHARLIE. With the ones who come.

HUGO. And minus the ones who don't.

(Hugo gets up and goes over to the desk.)

HUGO. Well. At least I keep my word.

MALIK. That's not possible.

CHARLIE. This morning you said there had to be an explanation.

MALIK. There is one. It's right in front of me, and it's not possible.

(Lou goes over to Rose. The others go quiet.)

LOU. Rose.

ROSE. I know.

LOU. Then say it. Why aren't you in it?

(A pause.)

ROSE. Because I'm leaving. July 3rd. My mom got a job in Montreal. A real one, with a contract. We sold the house. I'm leaving, and I'm not coming back.

ALMA. Montreal. In Canada?

ROSE. There's only one, Alma.

SAM. And when were you planning on telling us?

ROSE. Never. I was going to say "see you in September," like everybody, and go. Stop answering messages. A little less every week. Let it fade out on its own, so nobody would ever have to say goodbye. This morning at six I couldn't sleep, and I left the chat. That was the first step. It was easy.

HUGO. July 3rd. That's eighteen days from now.

ALMA. It doesn't fade out on its own, Rose. Ever. There's always someone who stays and sees it happen. I've run the chat since first year. I see who reads without answering, who answers with a thumbs-up, who doesn't even read anymore. I watch people leave one by one, without a sound. And I'm the one still sitting there, typing "you guys coming?" to people who don't come anymore.

LOU. I knew.

ROSE. What?

LOU. The sign outside your house. "Sold," in red, on the gate. A week ago. I saw it walking past in the morning. I didn't say anything. I waited. Every morning this week I came by to get you with two coffees, and I waited for you to tell me. Every single morning.

ROSE. I couldn't do it.

LOU. You did it just fine with your little button, at six twelve.

ROSE. Lou.

LOU. You decided that all by yourself. Leave, and let us forget you nice and gently. And where was I in all that? Show up to the photo in ten years and stand next to a wall? Tell people I used to have a friend called Rose, once?

SAM. Lou, wait...

LOU. No, Sam. Your photo, your reunion, your steps. If she's not coming, what's the point? I'm not going to stand next to a hole just to make you happy.

ROSE. I never said I wanted you to...

LOU. Then me neither. I'm not coming. If there's going to be a wall next to me, I'd rather not be there at all.

(A click, like a camera shutter. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Nobody moves.)

(Alma goes over to the desk and looks at the photo.)

ALMA. Lou's gone. In the front row there's Clara, and then the wall. Nothing but the wall.

LOU. Good.

(Lou goes and sits at the back of the room, far from everyone. Rose takes a step toward her, then stops.)

ROSE. Lou.

(Lou doesn't turn around. Blackout.)

ACT THREE: FIVE O'CLOCK

SCENE 1: THE ONE WHO STAYS

(The same room, late afternoon. A low orange light comes in through the window. The bags are packed, by the door. In the distance, a ring of keys, doors being locked one after another. Lou is standing by the wastebasket, the photo in her hands. Rose is near the window.)

LOU. Photos rip. Two tears and it's over. No more wall, no more hole, no more anything.

SAM. Lou, give it to me.

LOU. Why? For your album?

HUGO. I'm all for it. Rip it. It's been staring at us all day.

ALMA. If you rip it, we'll never know.

LOU. Never know what?

ALMA. If someone comes back. We won't know who's there and who's gone. We'll be like everybody else.

LOU. Like everybody else is fine. Everybody lives without knowing who'll be in their photo in ten years.

ROSE. Rip it.

(Everyone turns to Rose.)

ROSE. She's right. Rip it. It'll be simpler.

LOU. You love it when things are simpler.

CHARLIE. It won't change anything about the steps. The photo only shows. If you rip it, all you're ripping is what we can see.

LOU. Then I don't want to see anymore.

MALIK. Lou. I'd like to keep it a little longer. I'm in it, and I'm smiling. Tomorrow night, in that hallway, I'm going to need to know that. Just tomorrow night.

(A pause. Lou looks at Malik, then at the photo. She puts it down on the desk, face up, and goes to sit at the back of the room, alone.)

ADAM. The caretaker started on the second floor. At six, he locks the gate.

INÈS. That gives us an hour.

ADAM. Less.

SAM. This is my fault.

ALMA. Sam...

SAM. If I hadn't brought up the reunion this morning, there wouldn't be a photo. No steps, no wall. So I take it back. There's no reunion. Nobody meets up in ten years. It's canceled.

(Nothing. Everyone looks at the photo. Nothing happens.)

CHARLIE. It doesn't work like that. You can't decide for us.

SAM. I know. I tried anyway.

HUGO. Why do you care so much about these steps?

(A pause.)

SAM. You want to know what I'm doing after tomorrow? Nothing. Clara has Lyon. Hugo has Paris. Charlie has "far away." Rose has, I don't know, Canada. Me, I didn't apply anywhere. I didn't know what to apply for. Everybody had a box to tick, and I just stared at the boxes. The only thing I'd planned for the future was this. June 15th, ten years from now, with you. A date. I wanted at least one date.

ADAM. And where are you, in the photo?

SAM. Middle of the front row. I'm not looking at the camera. I'm looking at the others. Counting.

HUGO. Okay.

(Hugo stands up.)

HUGO. Since it's confession time. Paris is fake.

CLARA. What do you mean, fake?

HUGO. I never applied to Paris. I'm not going anywhere. Duval, down on the quay, the guy who builds wooden boats, the big flat-bottomed ones, he's taking me on as an apprentice. I start July 1st. I'm staying here. In this town, with the cow bus. My whole life, maybe.

INÈS. But that's great, Hugo. That's a real trade.

HUGO. I know it's great. That's not the problem.

CLARA. So what's the problem?

HUGO. The problem is you guys. You're all leaving. Clara to Lyon, Rose to Canada, Charlie to the end of the earth. And in ten years you all come back to the steps with your big-city stories, and there's me, with sawdust in my hair. The one who stayed. The one people ask, "So, still here?" Not coming to the steps anymore: I'd never said that out loud. Not even to myself. This morning, in Sam's game, I said it to get a laugh, and when I heard myself say it, I knew it was true. That's when I decided.

CLARA. How long have you known you wanted to build boats?

HUGO. Since I was twelve. I used to walk past his workshop on the way to middle school. There was a hull upside down, like a whale, and him underneath it, with his planes.

CLARA. Twelve.

HUGO. What?

CLARA. I've known what I'm going to do since I was fifteen, and I don't know if I even want it. Earlier, I saw my white coat, with the badge. I looked at it for a long time, and I thought: so that's it, then. There's nothing left to find. You're staying, and you chose it. I'm going to Lyon, and I didn't choose anything at all. I just got good grades.

HUGO. Want to swap? You can have my sawdust.

CLARA. I'd like to see your boats.

HUGO. They're ugly from far away. Up close, it's a different story.

CLARA. Up close, then.

(A pause.)

HUGO. Okay. I'll come. To your steps, Sam. To see Clara's face, with the white coat or without.

(A click, like a camera shutter. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Adam picks up the magnifying glass and leans over the photo.)

ADAM. He's back. Back row, in the middle. The tallest, as always.

HUGO. And the sawdust? Can you see the sawdust?

ADAM. You can see it. You've also got glue on your sweater.

HUGO. Perfect.

(Clara takes the glass from Adam without looking at the photo.)

CLARA. My turn. I don't know what I'll do. Medicine, maybe. Maybe not. Maybe something else, something I don't even know about yet. I don't know.

(A click. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Clara holds the glass out to Adam.)

CLARA. You look.

ADAM. You're blurry.

CLARA. Blurry?

ADAM. Like someone who moved right when the picture was taken. You can't see the white coat anymore. You can't see the badge. You can just see that you're there.

CLARA. Good. Blurry is good.

INÈS. You're the first person in history who actually wants to be blurry in a photo.

CLARA. There's a first time for everything.

INÈS. Clara. The audition, I'm doing it again next year. And if it's a no, you're the first person I'll tell.

CLARA. Why me?

INÈS. Because you saw me on that platform, and you didn't say a word for a whole month.

CLARA. Then I'll be on the platform. On the same side as you, this time.

SCENE 2: ELSEWHERE

(The sound of keys, a little closer. Inès turns to Alma.)

INÈS. Alma.

ALMA. What?

INÈS. You know what. It's now or never. Otherwise, in ten years you're still in the back row next to him, laughing, and still waiting.

ALMA. Inès, shut up.

INÈS. We won't look. Everybody to the window. Look at the tree.

(Inès pushes Hugo, Sam and Adam toward the window. Clara follows them. Charlie is already there. So is Rose. Malik stays by the desk. So does Alma.)

ALMA. They're listening.

MALIK. Of course they're listening.

HUGO. We're not listening. We're looking at the tree.

(A pause.)

ALMA. First year, the very first day, it was raining. You explained to the whole class why the sky is gray when it rains, and nobody had asked you anything. You talked for ten minutes. The teacher let you finish. And ever since that day, I... Ever since that day, it's been you. There. That's all. I'm not asking you for anything. I just wanted it said before tomorrow.

(A pause.)

MALIK. Alma, I don't know.

ALMA. Okay.

MALIK. No, wait. I'm not saying no. I'm saying I don't know. I don't know anything past tomorrow night. Tomorrow night my mom is on an operating table, and I'm in a hallway. I can't think further than that hallway. Ask me after. Ask me when she's awake.

ALMA. I'll ask you.

MALIK. Promise?

ALMA. Promise.

(Charlie leaves the window and comes to look at the photo.)

ALMA. Did anything happen?

CHARLIE. Nothing. You're still in the back row, side by side. Malik hasn't moved. Not even blurry.

ALMA. But he doesn't know.

CLARA. He didn't let go of anything.

ALMA. Then I've got ten years to ask again.

MALIK. Not ten years. Thursday. Ask me again on Thursday.

(The others come back from the window.)

HUGO. We didn't hear a thing.

INÈS. Not a thing. Thursday.

SAM. Charlie, at least you come back. With your bag and your hiking boots. You cross who knows what, and you're there, right on time, on the steps.

CHARLIE. That's the thing.

SAM. What's the thing?

CHARLIE. Since first year, I've drawn the same tree through the same window. Five hundred and eight times. I know every branch, every knot, the spot where the pigeons land and the one where they never land. I want to leave. Not to get away from you. To see trees I don't know. And in this photo, I come back, with my bag, to be on time on June 15th. Like my whole road was

only ever meant to end up here, on these steps, in front of the same linden.

SAM. And that's bad?

CHARLIE. It's not bad. It's just not what I want. On June 15th, ten years from now, I want to be on top of a mountain I don't even know the name of yet. I don't want to be up there checking my watch and thinking about you guys.

ADAM. Don't say that.

CHARLIE. I'm not coming.

(A click, like a camera shutter. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Nobody looks at the photo. Adam looks at Charlie.)

ADAM. There. It's done.

CHARLIE. I'll send you drawings. Of trees you've never seen.

ADAM. My dad wanted to see mountains too. He left when I was five. At first he sent me postcards. Lakes, peaks, mountain huts. On the back, always the same line: "Thinking of you." Three years of postcards. Then nothing. They're in a shoebox under my bed. I've never read them again.

CHARLIE. I'm not your father, Adam.

ADAM. He said it wasn't the same. He said it to my mom, out on the landing: "It's not the same, I'm not leaving you, I'm just going." I was behind the door.

CHARLIE. I'm not leaving anyone behind a door. I'm not coming to a photo. That's all.

ADAM. You're leaving a hole on the steps. Jade will be on my shoulders, and she'll ask me who the hole was. What do I tell her? Somebody who used to draw a tree?

CHARLIE. Tell her that. It's true.

ADAM. And then I show her some tree I've never seen, with "thinking of you" on the back?

(A pause. Charlie doesn't answer.)

ADAM. Send whatever you want. I won't open it.

(Adam goes back to the window and turns his back on the room. A pause. Charlie picks up the sketchbook and holds it out to Sam.)

CHARLIE. Here. The linden. Five hundred and eight times. Keep it for the photo.

SAM. I can't take that.

CHARLIE. Yes, you can. You're the one who's going to stand in front of this tree waiting for everybody. Take it.

(A pause. Sam takes the sketchbook.)

SAM. Then nobody has to come. Nobody. I'll be there, that's all. Whoever comes, comes.

(Sam opens the sketchbook and turns a few pages.)

SAM. You drew the pigeons.

CHARLIE. On the days there were any.

SCENE 3: OURS

(The sound of keys comes closer, one floor down. Rose crosses the room to Lou, at the back. The others move aside without a word. Rose stands in front of Lou.)

ROSE. Can I sit down?

LOU. It's a classroom. The chairs belong to everybody.

(Rose sits down next to her. A pause.)

ROSE. When I was ten, my best friend, Maëlle, moved to Brest. We wrote to each other every day. Then every Sunday. Then on birthdays. Then not at all. Last year I came across a photo of her by accident, on someone's phone. She was laughing with some other girls. And it took me three days to remember her last name. Three days. She'd been the most important person in my life, and I'd forgotten her name.

LOU. I'm not Maëlle.

ROSE. I know. That's why. I didn't want to be that for you. The name you spend three days trying to remember. So I thought: I'll do it myself. All at once. Before it happens on its own, little by little, and I have time to watch it coming.

LOU. You decided I was going to forget you.

ROSE. I decided I didn't want to watch it happen.

LOU. You didn't ask me. You decided for me. You've never asked me anything, Rose. Not even if I wanted to bring the coffees every morning.

ROSE. Did you?

LOU. Yes. Every morning. Even this week. Especially this week.

(A pause. The sound of keys, closer.)

LOU. You know what's in the photo now? There's Clara, blurry, and then the wall. And me, nowhere. That's what I wanted, earlier. Not to be next to a hole.

ROSE. I know.

LOU. I don't want that anymore.

(Lou stands up.)

LOU. I'll come. Ten years from now, June 15th, I'll come to the steps. Even if the wall is there. I'll stand next to the wall, in your spot, and I won't let anybody take it. And that night, I'll write to you in Montreal. I'll tell you who came, who has boats, who's blurry, who cut her hair, who has a little girl pulling his ears. You won't have to answer. I'll write anyway. You can't stop me.

(A click, like a camera shutter. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Adam leans over the photo with the magnifying glass.)

ADAM. Lou's back. Front row, next to Clara.

LOU. And next to me?

ADAM. The wall.

(Everyone turns to Rose. A long pause.)

ROSE. I don't know if I'll come. Montreal is far. I don't know if we'll have the money for the flight, I don't know who I'll be over there, I don't know if I'll want to. I don't know. That's the truth. But I don't want it to just fade out on its own anymore.

ALMA. Should I add you back to the chat?

ROSE. Add me back.

(Alma types on her phone. A click. The light dims for a moment, then comes back. Adam looks.)

ADAM. There's someone. Next to Lou. You can't tell who. It's blurry, really

blurry. Like someone who ran in at the very last second and jumped into the frame just before the click.

HUGO. You can't see who it is?

LOU. I can.

ALMA. "Rose joined the group." There's already a message.

ROSE. From who?

ALMA. From Hugo. It's a boat.

HUGO. A flat-bottomed boat. You've got to start somewhere.

(The sound of keys, right outside the door. Two knocks.)

MALIK. He's here.

CLARA. How long have we got?

ADAM. As long as it takes him to do the hallway. Two minutes.

(Sam picks up the photo, turns it face down on the desk, and puts Charlie's sketchbook on top of it.)

HUGO. You're not taking it?

SAM. No. It stays here.

HUGO. So when do we look at it?

SAM. In ten years. On the steps. To check.

INÈS. In the meantime, we take one. Ours. Right now.

(Inès props her phone on a stack of books, facing the class, and adjusts the screen.)

INÈS. In front of the window. Everybody. With the linden behind us.

(They line up in front of the window, jostling each other.)

HUGO. I'm going in the middle. I'm the tallest.

CLARA. I'm not promising to stay still.

INÈS. Nobody's asking you to.

ADAM. Just warning you, I'm going to close my eyes.

ALMA. Malik, don't look at the sun.

MALIK. I'm not looking at the sun.

CHARLIE. This one, I'm in.

(Adam shifts over to make room.)

SAM. I'm looking at the camera this time. I promise.

INÈS. Ten seconds. Go.

(Inès presses the button and runs to her spot. They squeeze together. Lou looks around for Rose.)

LOU. Rose. Closer.

ROSE. I'm here.

(The click of the phone. This time, the light doesn't dim. Blackout.)



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