

- * Durée : 3 heures
- * Dictionnaire bilingue autorisé

Version

Waiting at the school gates

At three fifteen every weekday afternoon, I become anonymous in a crowd of parents and child - minders congregating outside the school gates. [...]

After six weeks of waiting, I'm beginning to recognize individuals, to separate them from the all-embracing mass. They smile with recognition when I arrive now and nearly include me in their conversations. I don't say anything, but I like to listen. A few days ago, I was later than usual and only managed to reach the school gates as the children were already coming out. I dashed in, nearly fell over someone's pushchair, and collided with another girl. I'd seen her before: an au pair who picks up a boy and a girl.

"Sorry," I said, several times, to everyone.

The girl straightened up and smiled. "It's all right," she said.

I smiled back.

"I'm Hélène," she said awkwardly. "What is your name?"

"Kitty," I said eventually, because I couldn't think of a suitable alternative. [.....]

Now when we meet, we speak to each other.

"Hello, Kitty," she says.

"Hello, Hélène," I say.

"It's a lovely day."

"Yes, it's very warm."

"I forgot to put the washing out."

"Oh dear."

Our conversations are distinctly limited – short sentences with one subject, one verb. Nothing sensational, nothing important. I like the pointlessness of it all. The feeling that you are skimming the surface only. [...]

"Where do you come from?" I ask Hélène one day. I'm no good with accents.

"France."

"Oh," I say, "France." I have only been to France once, when I was sixteen, on a school trip. I was sick both ways on the ferry. [...]

Another mother is standing close to us with a toddler in a pushchair. The boy is wearing a yellow and black striped hat with a pompom on it, and his little fat cheeks are a brilliant red. He is holding a packet of sweets and trying to cram them into his mouth as quickly as possible. His head bobs up and down, so that he looks like a bumble bee about to take off.

"Jeremy, darling," says his mother, "finish eating one before starting on the next." He contemplates her instructions for five seconds and then continues to stuff them in at the same rate as before.

She turns to Hélène. "What part of France?"

Hélène looks pleased to be asked. "Brittany."