

EDGEWORK BOOKS

First Round Sampler



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From
The Grasshopper's Secret
Renate Stendhal

CHAPTER 7



“Where are we?” Zelda asked the Grasshopper. She had never seen a cobbled street. The houses on each side looked like old doll houses that had received a few kicks too many.

“Where are we?” she asked again.

It was winter. People were huddling along in coats with large, raised collars. Some were wrapped entirely in fur. Others looked shaggy, freezing. A beggar under a gable was sticking his red hands and forearms out into the stream of passersby. A woman and five kids, bundled up in wool hats and scarfs, were pushing a huge pine tree along on a cart. A group of boys came running down a side street, their laced boots cracking up a storm on the stones. Their long, dark blue scarves were flying, and they all wore dark blue jackets and short pants. They were laughing and shouting and didn't seem at all cold. Zelda liked watching them run with their naked legs. She hardly noticed that they had entered a church with many pointed towers.

Now they were inside. She too, must be inside then, she realized.

She saw the boys race up a spiral staircase to a sort of balcony with a large organ, and now she, too, was on that balcony.

There was no time to think about how she had got there.

The boys had thrown off their jackets and scarves. They were bombarding each other with paper balls, booklets, gloves, kicking chairs over. They were almost all blond boys. One boy was particularly fast at catching and returning the objects aimed at him even though he was among the smallest. Zelda grinned at the way he snatched a book hurled across the balcony just before it would have hit the belly of a man who had appeared at the top of the staircase.

She marveled at the speed with which they all lined up in orderly rows in front of the fat little man who had positioned himself at a raised lectern. He made an announcement in a language that sounded as though he had a bad throat. At his signal, they all began to sing.

“Aahh-ayy-eee-ohh-ooo,” they sang, their voices rising higher and higher until they sounded like a bunch of piping flutes. Then their song with only one word climbed down the same musical staircase, step by step. These boys loved singing and they knew how to hold a note, Zelda noted.

They also clearly loved their fat little master who wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and pointed his stick at them. They eagerly followed his every command. At another of his announcements, they all turned the pages of their booklets with the rustle of a hundred birds taking off. The song they didn't know by heart had a strangely woven, sad melody. The boy who had caught the book in mid-air sang a solo. Perhaps they weren't real boys?, Zelda wondered. She must be hearing an angel.

“What's he saying?” She was suddenly aware that the Grasshopper was in the church, too, sitting right next to her.

“The song tells about Mary and Joseph on a mountainside, trying to rock their baby in the cold wind,” the Grasshopper translated.

Up and down the song wove its sadness. Zelda recognized one word, “Ach!,” a word her mother used when she got bad news. She was relieved when the choir and the soloist began a new song.

“What’s this one about?”

“It is about a rose coming into bloom in the middle of winter,” the Grasshopper said.

Zelda peeked at her companion. Roses bloomed in her father’s garden all year long, but would anybody sing about it? Her father might, she had to admit, when he was in one of his good moods.

The soloist was so small they had put him on a footstool in front. His hair was cut in the same perfect square as most of the boys’, a neat line of very short bangs crossing his forehead. The sides came straight down his temples, too long for a boy. Or was it a girl? All the others were boys, so he must be one, too.

There was something disturbing in his face. He seemed to be adoring someone or something only he could see. While he sang, the other boys appeared to be holding their breath as if caught in some spell. Then, at an energetic sweep of their master’s arm, they all came back to life and finished in chorus. The master knocked on his lectern, gave the soloist’s head a pat and stepped down, wiping his forehead and shouting orders of some kind.

The minute he disappeared from view, the boys fell to chasing and boxing each other as they had before. The little soloist

was a favorite target of a group of older boys who tried to pin him down and tickle him. Zelda watched him wiggle himself free and thumb his nose at them. With a leap, he was back on his footstool just as the master reappeared. He marked his perfect timing with a laugh to himself, throwing his head back, his nose crinkled, his blond bangs stiff in the air.

“Kidcou??” Zelda squinted hard. “Is that Kidcou?”

He looked about half his age, with his weird haircut and big round cheeks, a real baby. And yet, once the link was made, there could be no doubt.

“Grasshopper, did you take him, too?”

She read the Grasshopper’s amused smile.

“He’s not following us, is he?”

But she knew that this Kidcou hadn’t come along. The boy she knew wasn’t here. She herself perhaps wasn’t here. Her head was spinning. Nobody had turned around or stopped singing when she’d shouted out his name.

“Where are we?” She felt nauseated, the way she had on the cherry tree. She almost grabbed the Grasshopper’s sleeve. “Are we really here? Is this ... Italy?”

“Just a leap or two from Italy,” the Grasshopper replied, her fine long hand marking the rhythm of a new song the choir had begun. “We are in Vienna. A leap backwards in time, you understand. Your little friend here has barely entered the third grade. Listen to them. They are rehearsing for a Christmas concert. The famous Vienna choir boyzzz ...”

Zelda recognized the melody of “Silent Night.” She felt reassured by the familiarity of the song. Her family didn’t do Christmas, but if she recognized that song, she must be here, wherever here was.

A leap backwards in time? If this Kidcou suddenly was several years younger, how old was she? She fought with another attack of nausea. Then it occurred to her that logically, her age couldn't have changed if she could remember what had happened recently. It all came to her in an instant: her punishment, Kidcou's betrayal, her escape with the Grasshopper. She hadn't changed. Only this Kidcou had.

Perhaps going backwards in time was like remembering something from before. Remembering perhaps was like being there. But how could she remember those boys and their master? Kidcou had never peeped a word about them. He had never sung like that. Could one remember something one didn't know to begin with?

She listened with curious ears to the song she recognized. It sounded perfect, but the little fat master wasn't satisfied. He huffed and even shook his handkerchief at the famous boys as though trying to chase flies. He had his tiny soloist sing a line and part of the choir repeat after him.

This Kidcou seemed to be the star of it all. It was hard to believe, like watching him play a character in a movie. But there was no movie screen and no projector. She was and wasn't in this church with the Grasshopper who was wearing her old, dusty travel coat and Uncle Carlo's glasses. She herself was still in her bermudas, not feeling the least bit cold.

And there was Kidcou, a Kidcou she didn't know at all. He was not only younger, he was altogether different. He clearly played an important role in this group of singing boys, small as he was. He knew how to put up a good fight, and he had the best voice. They all seemed proud of him. How had he been able to hide all this from her?

All of a sudden the rehearsal was interrupted. A priest came hurrying up the stairs, holding his habit up as one would a dress. He whispered with the master, and both kept glancing in turn at a piece of paper the priest had brought, and at Kidcou. The little fat man looked worried. He called Kidcou over to him, knelt down beside him and talked to him. Zelda saw Kidcou's face go blank. He looked down, his body suddenly limp. All life had gone out of him.

He made a small nod. He didn't look up again. He turned around and stiffly followed the priest who took Kidcou's dark blue scarf and jacket from a chair. While everyone watched in utter silence, the priest led Kidcou down the stairs. The echo of their steps disappeared in the creaking of the church door.

Now the boys were in a tumult, shouting and asking and protesting. Zelda would have given anything to join them. It made her mad not to understand the brief words the master said, before he knocked on his lectern with fury and called another boy up to the footstool in front.

"Why? Why did they take him away?" Zelda tugged at her companion's coat. "Will he come back?"

"He won't, alas. The telegram from his foster parents calls for his immediately joining them in another country."

"Just like that? Why? Can't they leave him alone?"

"Most parents don't leave their children alone, you may have noticed. They do what they consider best for them. Your little friend's foster parents believe that the Vienna boys choir will not provide a future for him."

"A future?"

"Kidcou's father was a musician, a gifted pianist. But he was unable to make a living, which caused a lot of grief to his

his family, you see. When he and his wife died, Kidcou was raised by relatives. From the start, his foster parents were eager to give him an education that would not only further his musical talents but also allow him to become a lawyer or diplomat ... ”

“Like his foster father who works for the rich,” Zelda scowled.

The Grasshopper weighed her head. “Kidcou has changed places and countries with them before. I noticed that you noticed his reaction?”

Zelda balled her fist. “Not fair. I would have yelled and kicked until they let me stay.”

The Grasshopper looked at her as if she had said something of unusual interest.

“His foster parents have arranged to spend some time with him over Christmas, in Germany, before sending him to a boys’ school in England.”

“But does he want to go?”

“He does not know it yet.”

“A school for lawyers for the rich?”

“We will see ... we will soon see, I suppose.”

“See what? I don’t want to go to a boys’ school. I want to go to Italy!”

“Certainly, to Italy.” The Grasshopper performed a little bow to Zelda. She raised her long, very long fingers as if they were antennae, sensing a breeze. “Before we set out, you and I, I asked you if you were ready to travel in the grasshoppers’ way. Do you remember?”

“When grasshoppers leap, do they know the exact spot where they will land? There is the wind, there is promise and danger. What grasshoppers know is to trust their sense of

direction and follow their destiny.”

“Can’t we use a map?” Zelda was getting fidgety.

“There is no map for destiny. In order to get to Italy, where your little friend has brought me from, we will have to use him as our guide.”

“He’s not my friend. I wish you’d come to America on your own. Why use him, when they keep sending him around to stupid places?”

“I admit, a grasshopper’s travel may seem a bit of a zzzig-zzzag to other species. But remember, we are traveling in the past. In order to keep our direction and get to our destination, leaping along a life already lived is the surest way. Take heart, Zzzelda: we are on our way. To Italy.”