

Hesse

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

★ "SPELLBINDING . . . COMES ALIVE WITH THE DETAILS OF TIME AND PLACE."—KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

A NOVEL BY NEWBERY MEDALIST
KAREN HESSE

BT
SQUARE
FISH



THE BRIDE

The girl, thick hair pinned up in the latest style, fell into the company under the bridge wearing her wedding dress, all she had left in the world after quitting her job as a waitress to marry a man she'd met through the classifieds.

The ad said:

"Looking for a young woman with money of her own."

The children exchange glances.

Money of your own? Did you have money of your own?

She nods. What a slow nod, what a slow, sad nod. A nod that says I never knew what the world was like before today. She sits on a tin drum in her wedding dress.

Without telling her mother, she answered the ad in the classifieds:

"Refined and gentle," what he wanted in a girl.

"Bright and ambitious," what he said about himself.

Her mother could have read her thoughts in Danish, but not in English, and these thoughts of courtship with a handsome stranger were in English. She deceived that

mother, that mother, that poor lost mother, when she answered the ad and fell in love.

He was so handsome.

It was June when they first met and almost from the start he looked at her like it hurt to love her so much. He looked at her like no one had ever looked at her before.

She could see how much he suffered when he looked at her that way. She couldn't help herself.

He was so handsome.

He took her on the trolley to Newark. They climbed down, arm in arm, and walked, and talked under an arbor of trees along the streets of Newark. And at last they stopped before a cottage.

A cottage?

She nodded.

A cottage he was buying, *she told them.*

For you?

For us.

He opened the door.

With a key?

With a key.

And he promised her a future in that empty cottage where she arranged imaginary furniture a dozen different ways. And he laughed and pretended with her. He begged her to be his bride and she said yes.

You said yes?

She gave notice at the restaurant.

They were jealous, the way they looked at me, me, Gretta Hansen, a girl with a beau and a cottage and a future.

So she couldn't go back. Could never go back. Not to work, not to her mother.

How did he leave you?

How did you know he left?

They look at her.

At 150 Broadway, Manhattan, outside City Hall . . .

She had bathed so carefully that morning, rubbing herself with rose oil. Then the clothing, her undergarments scented, satin against skin. Each layer went on. But just before she left, her mother came home unexpectedly and found her before the mirror, turning to admire herself one more time before meeting Charlie.

Charlie?

Her mother pleaded, how she pleaded.

What are you doing? Better you should take a knife and stab me in the back!

She screamed and she wept. She grabbed at The Bride, her daughter, her Gretta, who thought only of tearing loose, fleeing through the door, down the hall, down stairs and landings to marry Charlie. How her mother fought for her.

See here where she ripped the lace?

A little rip, a rip you'd never notice unless you were looking.

She ran to the trolley in her wedding dress, in the rain. So much rain, and her umbrella still at the restaurant. Her heart wouldn't stay in her chest. It pounded in her eyes, and her ears, and her throat. She would die if she didn't marry Charlie. Die. She would!

And then suddenly there he was, waiting on the steps for his bride to come, and sunlight touched her heart, even on this dreary day, and she ran to him, imagining how she looked, her wedding dress clinging to her in the rain.

He was so handsome.

Reaching his hand out to her, he caressed her face, he loved her completely, even sopping wet, dripping. She gave him all she had in the world, her trust, her innocence, and her savings, transferred from her purse to his gentle hand.

My dearest, he said, my dearest Gretta, wait here. I'll be only a moment.

And he disappeared inside City Hall to talk to the mayor, to make things ready. The rain kept falling. She could see her wedding dress reflected in pools of rainwater. Rain ran down the steps of City Hall. An hour passed. Rain dripped from the lintel over the door. And another hour. And even one more.

She sneezed and felt herself grow colder, and paler, until she was as white as her dress because . . .

She knew. She, she knew at last. Even she had to know. She put the truth between her lips like a lozenge

and it settled on her tongue with its little barbed hooks. It caught in her throat and she couldn't swallow.

And he didn't come back.

The children knew the last line of her story before she ever began, before she said the first word, they knew how it would end.

And he didn't come back.

You can't stay in a wedding dress forever.

The children knew to protect her they had to peel the hurt away, though even in other clothes she would always be The Bride to them.

They found her some widow's black off a line. She changed into the ugly dress and folded her wedding whites, handing them to the boy with the derby hat, Max. And he and his friend, Karl, sold them for her, gave her the money.

She bought food for all of them. Her wedding feast.

Their banquet tables were ash cans.