

NUMBER THE STARS

novel by Lois Lowry



NUMBER THE STARS

Lois Lowry

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For my friend
Annelise Platt
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1

Why Are You Running?

“I’ll race you to the corner, Ellen!” Annemarie adjusted the thick leather pack on her back so that her schoolbooks balanced evenly. “Ready?” She looked at her best friend.

Ellen made a face. “No,” she said, laughing. “You know I can’t beat you — my legs aren’t as long. Can’t we just walk, like civilized people?” She was a stocky ten-year-old, unlike lanky Annemarie.

“We have to practice for the athletic meet on Friday — I *know* I’m going to win the girls’ race this week. I was second last week, but I’ve been practicing every day. Come on, Ellen,” Annemarie pleaded, eyeing the distance to the next corner of the Copenhagen street. “Please?”

Ellen hesitated, then nodded and shifted her own rucksack of books against her shoulders. “Oh, all right. Ready,” she said.

“Go!” shouted Annemarie, and the two girls were off, racing along the residential sidewalk. Annemarie’s silvery blond hair flew behind her, and Ellen’s dark pigtails bounced against her shoulders.

“Wait for me!” wailed little Kirsti, left behind, but the two older girls weren’t listening.

Annemarie outdistanced her friend quickly, even though one of her shoes came untied as she sped along the street called Østerbrogade, past the small shops and cafés of her neighborhood here in northeast Copenhagen. Laughing, she skirted an elderly lady in black who carried a shopping bag made of string. A young woman pushing a baby in a carriage moved aside to make way. The corner was just ahead.

Annemarie looked up, panting, just as she reached the corner. Her laughter stopped. Her heart seemed to skip a beat.

“*Halte!*” the soldier ordered in a stern voice.

The German word was as familiar as it was frightening. Annemarie had heard it often enough before, but it had never been directed at her until now.

Behind her, Ellen also slowed and stopped. Far back, little Kirsti was plodding along, her face in a pout because the girls hadn’t waited for her.

Annemarie stared up. There were two of them. That meant two helmets, two sets of cold eyes glaring at her, and four tall shiny boots planted firmly on the sidewalk, blocking her path to home.

And it meant two rifles, gripped in the hands of the soldiers. She stared at the rifles first. Then, finally, she looked into the face of the soldier who had ordered her to halt.

“Why are you running?” the harsh voice asked. His Danish was very poor. Three years, Annemarie thought with contempt. Three years they’ve been in our country, and still they can’t speak our language.

“I was racing with my friend,” she answered politely. “We have races at school every Friday, and I want to do well, so I —” Her voice trailed away, the sentence unfinished. Don’t talk so much, she told herself. Just answer them, that’s all.

She glanced back. Ellen was motionless on the sidewalk, a few yards behind her. Farther back, Kirsti was still sulking, and walking slowly toward the corner. Nearby, a woman had come to the doorway of a shop and was standing silently, watching.

One of the soldiers, the taller one, moved toward her. Annemarie recognized him as the one she and Ellen always called, in whispers, “the Giraffe” because of his height and the long neck that extended from his stiff collar. He and his partner were always on this corner.

He prodded the corner of her backpack with the stock of his rifle. Annemarie trembled. “What is in here?” he asked loudly. From the corner of her eye, she saw the shopkeeper move quietly back into the shadows of the doorway, out of sight.

“Schoolbooks,” she answered truthfully.

“Are you a good student?” the soldier asked. He seemed to be sneering.

“Yes.”

“What is your name?”

“Annemarie Johansen.”

“Your friend — is she a good student, too?” He was looking beyond her, at Ellen, who hadn’t moved.

Annemarie looked back, too, and saw that Ellen’s face, usually rosy-cheeked, was pale, and her dark eyes were wide.

She nodded at the soldier. “Better than me,” she said.

“What is her name?”

“Ellen.”

“And who is this?” he asked, looking to Annemarie’s side. Kirsti had appeared there suddenly, scowling at everyone.

“My little sister.” She reached down for Kirsti’s hand, but Kirsti, always stubborn, refused it and put her hands on her hips defiantly.

The soldier reached down and stroked her little sister’s short, tangled curls. Stand still, Kirsti, Annemarie ordered silently, praying that somehow the obstinate five-year-old would receive the message.

But Kirsti reached up and pushed the soldier’s hand away. “*Don’t*,” she said loudly.

Both soldiers began to laugh. They spoke to each other in rapid German that Annemarie couldn’t understand.

“She is pretty, like my own little girl,” the tall one said in a more pleasant voice.

Annemarie tried to smile politely.

“Go home, all of you. Go study your schoolbooks. And don’t run. You look like hoodlums when you run.”

The two soldiers turned away. Quickly Annemarie reached down again and grabbed her sister’s hand before Kirsti could resist. Hurrying the little girl along, she rounded the corner. In a moment Ellen was beside her. They walked quickly, not speaking, with Kirsti between them, toward the large apartment building where both families lived.

When they were almost home, Ellen whispered suddenly, “I was so scared.”

“Me too,” Annemarie whispered back.

As they turned to enter their building, both girls looked straight ahead, toward the door. They did it purposely so that they would not catch the eyes or the attention of two more soldiers, who stood with their guns on this corner as well. Kirsti scurried ahead of them through the door, chattering about the picture she was bringing home from kindergarten to show Mama. For Kirsti, the soldiers were simply part of the landscape, something that had always been there, on every corner, as unimportant as lampposts, throughout her remembered life.

“Are you going to tell your mother?” Ellen asked Annemarie as they trudged together up the stairs. “I’m not. My mother would be upset.”

“No, I won’t, either. Mama would probably scold me for running on the street.”

She said goodbye to Ellen on the second floor, where Ellen lived, and continued on to the third, practicing in her mind a cheerful greeting for her mother: a smile, a description of today’s spelling test, in which she had done well.

But she was too late. Kirsti had gotten there first.

“And he poked Annemarie’s book bag with his gun, and then he grabbed my hair!” Kirsti was chattering as she took off her sweater in the center of the apartment living room. “But I wasn’t scared. Annemarie was, and Ellen, too. But not me!”

Mrs. Johansen rose quickly from the chair by the window where she’d been sitting. Mrs. Rosen, Ellen’s mother, was there, too, in the opposite chair. They’d been having coffee together, as they did many afternoons. Of course it wasn’t really coffee, though the mothers still called it that: “having coffee.” There had been no real coffee in Copenhagen since the beginning of the Nazi occupation. Not even any real tea. The mothers sipped at hot water flavored with herbs.

“Annemarie, what happened? What is Kirsti talking about?” her mother asked anxiously.

“Where’s Ellen?” Mrs. Rosen had a frightened look.

“Ellen’s in your apartment. She didn’t realize you were here,” Annemarie explained. “Don’t worry. It wasn’t anything. It was the two soldiers who stand on the corner of Østerbrogade — you’ve seen them; you know the tall one with the long neck, the one who looks like a silly giraffe?” She told her mother and Mrs. Rosen of the incident, trying to make it sound humorous and unimportant. But their uneasy looks didn’t change.

“I slapped his hand and shouted at him,” Kirsti announced importantly.

“No, she didn’t, Mama,” Annemarie reassured her mother. “She’s exaggerating, as she always does.”

Mrs. Johansen moved to the window and looked down to the street below. The Copenhagen neighborhood was quiet; it looked the same as always: people coming and going from the shops, children at play, the soldiers on the corner.

She spoke in a low voice to Ellen’s mother. “They must be edgy because of the latest Resistance incidents. Did you read in *De Frie Danske* about the bombings in Hillerød and Nørrebro?”

Although she pretended to be absorbed in unpacking her schoolbooks, Annemarie listened, and she knew what her mother was referring to. *De Frie Danske* — *The Free Danes* — was an illegal newspaper;

Peter Neilsen brought it to them occasionally, carefully folded and hidden among ordinary books and papers, and Mama always burned it after she and Papa had read it. But Annemarie heard Mama and Papa talk, sometimes at night, about the news they received that way: news of sabotage against the Nazis, bombs hidden and exploded in the factories that produced war materials, and industrial railroad lines damaged so that the goods couldn't be transported.

And she knew what Resistance meant. Papa had explained, when she overheard the word and asked. The Resistance fighters were Danish people — no one knew who, because they were very secret — who were determined to bring harm to the Nazis however they could. They damaged the German trucks and cars, and bombed their factories. They were very brave. Sometimes they were caught and killed.

"I must go and speak to Ellen," Mrs. Rosen said, moving toward the door. "You girls walk a different way to school tomorrow. Promise me, Annemarie. And Ellen will promise, too."

"We will, Mrs. Rosen, but what does it matter? There are German soldiers on every corner."

"They will remember your faces," Mrs. Rosen said, turning in the doorway to the hall. "It is important to be one of the crowd, always. Be one of

many. Be sure that they never have reason to remember your face.” She disappeared into the hall and closed the door behind her.

“He’ll remember *my* face, Mama,” Kirsti announced happily, “because he said I look like *his* little girl. He said I was pretty.”

“If he has such a pretty little girl, why doesn’t he go back to her like a good father?” Mrs. Johansen murmured, stroking Kirsti’s cheek. “Why doesn’t he go back to his own country?”

“Mama, is there anything to eat?” Annemarie asked, hoping to take her mother’s mind away from the soldiers.

“Take some bread. And give a piece to your sister.”

“With butter?” Kirsti asked hopefully.

“No butter,” her mother replied. “You know that.”

Kirsti sighed as Annemarie went to the breadbox in the kitchen. “I wish I could have a cupcake,” she said. “A big yellow cupcake, with pink frosting.”

Her mother laughed. “For a little girl, you have a long memory,” she told Kirsti. “There hasn’t been any butter, or sugar for cupcakes, for a long time. A year, at least.”

“When will there be cupcakes again?”

“When the war ends,” Mrs. Johansen said. She

glanced through the window, down to the street corner where the soldiers stood, their faces impassive beneath the metal helmets. “When the soldiers leave.”

2

Who Is the Man Who Rides Past?

“Tell me a story, Annemarie,” begged Kirsti as she snuggled beside her sister in the big bed they shared. “Tell me a fairy tale.”

Annemarie smiled and wrapped her arms around her little sister in the dark. All Danish children grew up familiar with fairy tales. Hans Christian Andersen, the most famous of the tale tellers, had been Danish himself.

“Do you want the one about the little mermaid?” That one had always been Annemarie’s own favorite.

But Kirsti said no. “Tell one that starts with a king and a queen. And they have a beautiful daughter.”

“All right. Once upon a time there was a king,” Annemarie began.

“And a queen,” whispered Kirsti. “Don’t forget the queen.”

“And a queen. They lived together in a wonderful palace, and —”

“Was the palace named Amalienborg?” Kirsti asked sleepily.

“Shhh. Don’t keep interrupting or I’ll never finish

the story. No, it wasn't Amalienborg. It was a pretend palace.”

Annemarie talked on, making up a story of a king and queen and their beautiful daughter, Princess Kirsten; she sprinkled her tale with formal balls, fabulous gold-trimmed gowns, and feasts of pink-frosted cupcakes, until Kirsti's deep, even breathing told her that her sister was sound asleep.

She stopped, waited for a moment, half expecting Kirsti to murmur “Then what happened?” But Kirsti was still. Annemarie's thoughts turned to the real king, Christian X, and the real palace, Amalienborg, where he lived, in the center of Copenhagen.

How the people of Denmark loved King Christian! He was not like fairy tale kings, who seemed to stand on balconies giving orders to subjects, or who sat on golden thrones demanding to be entertained and looking for suitable husbands for their daughters. King Christian was a real human being, a man with a serious, kind face. She had seen him often, when she was younger. Each morning, he had come from the palace on his horse, Jubilee, and ridden alone through the streets of Copenhagen, greeting his people. Sometimes, when Annemarie was a little girl, her older sister, Lise, had taken her to stand on the sidewalk so that she could wave to King Christian. Sometimes he had waved back to the two of them, and smiled. “Now you are special forever,” Lise had