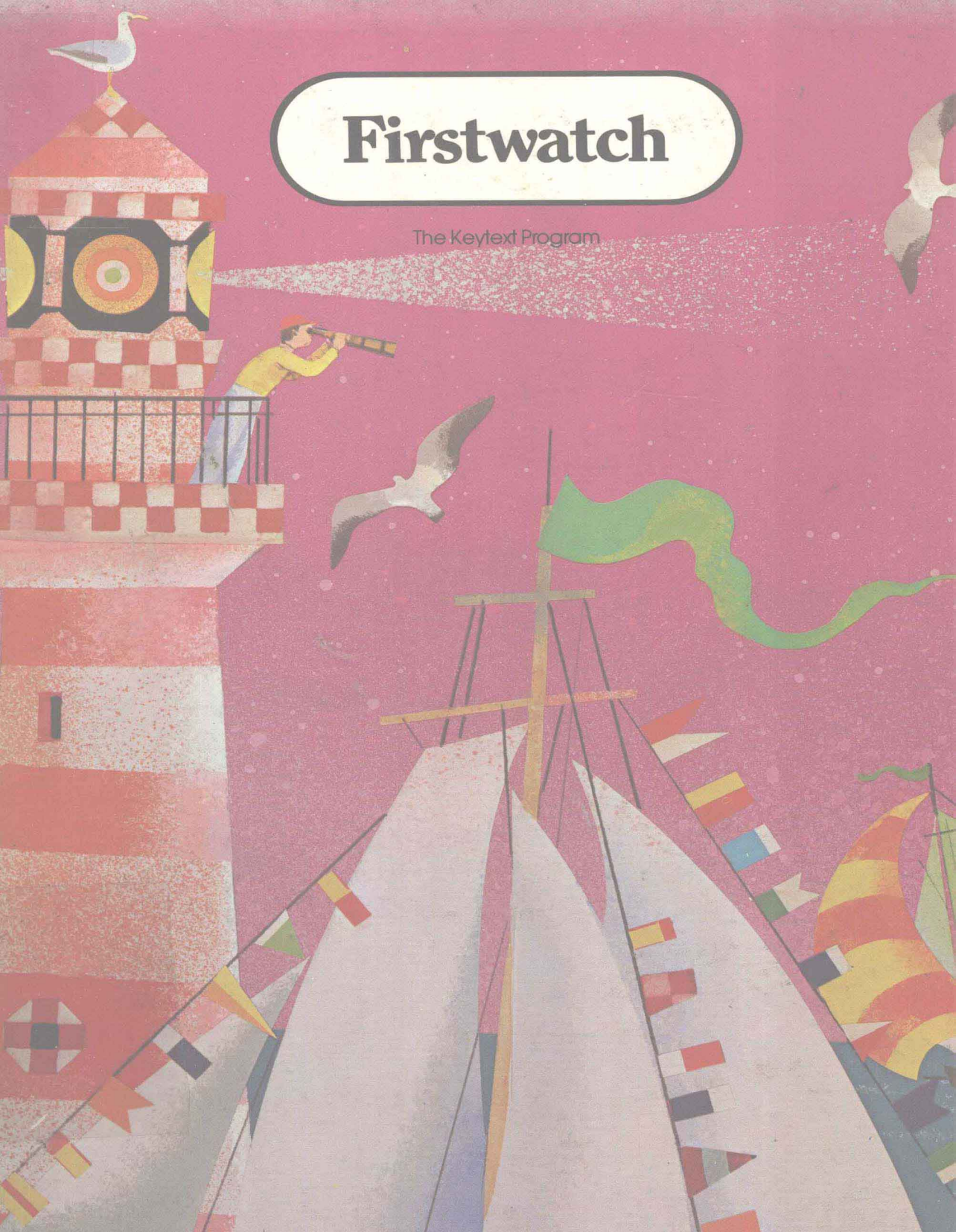
Firstwatch

The Keytext Program



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The Keytext Program

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Art Direction and Production: Edit, Inc.

The Keytext Program was developed with the participation of Kraft and Kraft, Stow, Massachusetts.

ISBN 0-8332-2202-3 Softcover
ISBN 0-8332-2201-5 Hardcover
THE ECONOMY COMPANY, Educational Publishers
1901 North Walnut Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73125

3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10-89 88 87 86 85 84 83

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If only Nana had understood.

"You are repairing a boat?" Nana had said. "I don't know if that is ladylike."

"Oh, Nana," Sona said, "it's a beautiful boat. And Tommy's uncle is a real sailor. He's sailed all over the world."

"If you want to go and see the boat, fine," Nana said. "But why must you sand and paint?"

"Because," Sona said, "whoever helps repair the boat gets to go for the first sail. Mr. O'Brien bought it from another man, and it needs lots and lots of paint and varnish. Then we're going to sail it right into the bay, Nana."

Nana was stunned.

"Into the bay?" She shook her head. "Your mother and father are trusting me to raise you safely, as well as to be a lady. The bay sounds dangerous. I must think. We will say nothing to the family until I have decided if it is yes or it is no."

Sona tried not to think about that "no."

Every day after school she and Tommy walked as fast as they could down the long city blocks, past the flats and apartments, down to the harbor. This much Nana would allow.

Through foggy days and sunny days they scraped and they sanded until their fingers ached, but they didn't mind. They would listen to Mr. O'Brien tell about the storms and the winds he had fought, and about the people he met in strange ports—sometimes as skipper of beautiful big yachts, sometimes on his own smaller boats.

"Someday I'm going to Tahiti," Tommy said.

"And I'm going to Bombay," said Sona.

"Why not?" said Tommy's uncle. "A sailor starts by dreaming."

When they began to paint the deck, Sona came home with dark stains on her fingers.

"What is that ugliness?" Nana said. "Will it wash off?"

"No," Sona said. "I've tried already. But it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" said Nana. "Of course it matters. If you want to continue with this foolishness you must at least wear gloves while you paint."

"Nana," said Sona, "sailors don't wear gloves."

"Sailors?" said Nana. "Who is thinking of sailors? I am thinking of ladies. Ladies do not have ugly stained hands."

The next day Sona tried wearing Nana's rubber gloves. It made her fingers feel thick, and before she knew it she had spilled a can of paint.

"Watch it!" called Mr. O'Brien.

Sona's face felt hot.

"I guess a real sailor would never do that," she said as she cleaned it up.

"Takes a long time to become a real sailor," said Jerry O'Brien. "It's not only a matter of deciding. You practice the piano every day. Couldn't just say 'I'm a piano player' and then be one."

"The trouble is," said Sona, "that it's hard to be a piano player and a sailor too."

"Music and sailing," said Jerry O'Brien. "Two of the best things in the world. Why give one up?"

I won't, Sona thought. Even if I have to run away to sea. But it was hard to picture running away with a great big piano. And even harder to picture taking the whole family along. Sona wondered how she would ever work it out.

It wasn't easy, either, to practice the piano with fingers that were not only stained but scraped raw and blistered.

On Sunday, when she played for her aunts and uncles, they looked at each other and then back at her in surprise.

"Something is wrong?" asked Uncle Kosrove. "You have been ill and not practicing?"

"She's having an off day," said her mother. "That's all. Johnny, play your violin for us now."

"Sure," said Johnny, "but why doesn't Sona tell us what's the matter? And why do her hands look funny?"

"Never mind," said Nana. "Soon will be time to tell and then she'll tell."

Yes, Sona thought. Next Sunday. That was the day her

two worlds would bump into each other. That was the day the boat would be ready to sail. They would hoist the sails and take a trial run right into San Francisco Bay. Mr. O'Brien, Tommy, and Sona. Captain, mate, and crew. That is, if the crew was there.

Johnny finished playing the violin and now Uncle Levon picked up his oud, strummed a few chords, and started to sing. He sang a sad-beautiful song, and something in it made Sona feel she could tell Uncle Levon about the boat, about the bay, and about the sea that Jerry O'Brien had sailed and that she wanted to sail too. But she didn't, because Nana had said to say nothing till she decided.

Sona knew she couldn't wait much longer, because Mr. O'Brien had said she absolutely had to have her family's permission. Or better yet, one of them could come along. Otherwise she couldn't go on the maiden voyage of the fresh new *North Star*. What if she couldn't get Nana's permission?

Sona tried to ask on Monday. The words wouldn't come out. She tried on Tuesday. Nothing happened.

On Thursday she closed her eyes and thought the words for the hundredth time, and she must have said her thoughts out loud, because she heard Nana answering, "No! No, I have decided against it. To sail into that great bay! In a tiny boat! Do you think we found you on the streets, to take such a chance with you?"

"It's not a chance," Sona said. "Mr. O'Brien has sailed clear around the world, and he's been training us. Especially Tommy. He's going to be first mate."

Nana kept rolling out some dough. She said nothing.

"Besides," Sona went on, "Mr. O'Brien knows we both can swim, and by Sunday he'll buy some new life jackets."

Nana's rolling pin stopped.

"Sunday?" she exclaimed. "Did you say Sunday?"

"Mr. O'Brien said it would be after church," Sona said in a tiny voice.

"Certainly. After church," Nana said. "But what of dinner? What of the family?"

"We'll try not to be back too late," Sona said miserably. "You said you would really think about it."

"Yes," Nana said, "and I am a lady who keeps her word. I have been thinking about it. About sailing. Which is hard enough. And about meeting Mr. O'Brien. But not about changing our whole family life. No. That is too much."

No. That was the answer.

After all the scraping and sanding and painting. No.

After all the dreams of sailing with the wind. No.

And those dreams of faraway, mysterious ports.

Just plain no.

On Sunday, as Sona set the large dining-room table, she could hear her mother and her grandmother bustling about in the kitchen. When she heard the noisy sizzling and gurgling of food cooking, and the clatter of baking tins pulled from the oven, she thought, Now! and ran quietly down the stairs. She ran past the apartments, past the houses, till finally, out of breath, she came to the docks. She really had run away to sea!

She stood at the pier to catch her breath, and watched the boats, large boats and small, rising and falling in the water. They looked so comfortable, so exactly right. Then why did she feel so exactly wrong?

Because I know I shouldn't be here, she thought.

But she knew she couldn't stay away either.

Down the docks she saw Mr. O'Brien and Tommy, arms full of the great bulky sails, starting to attach them to the mast.

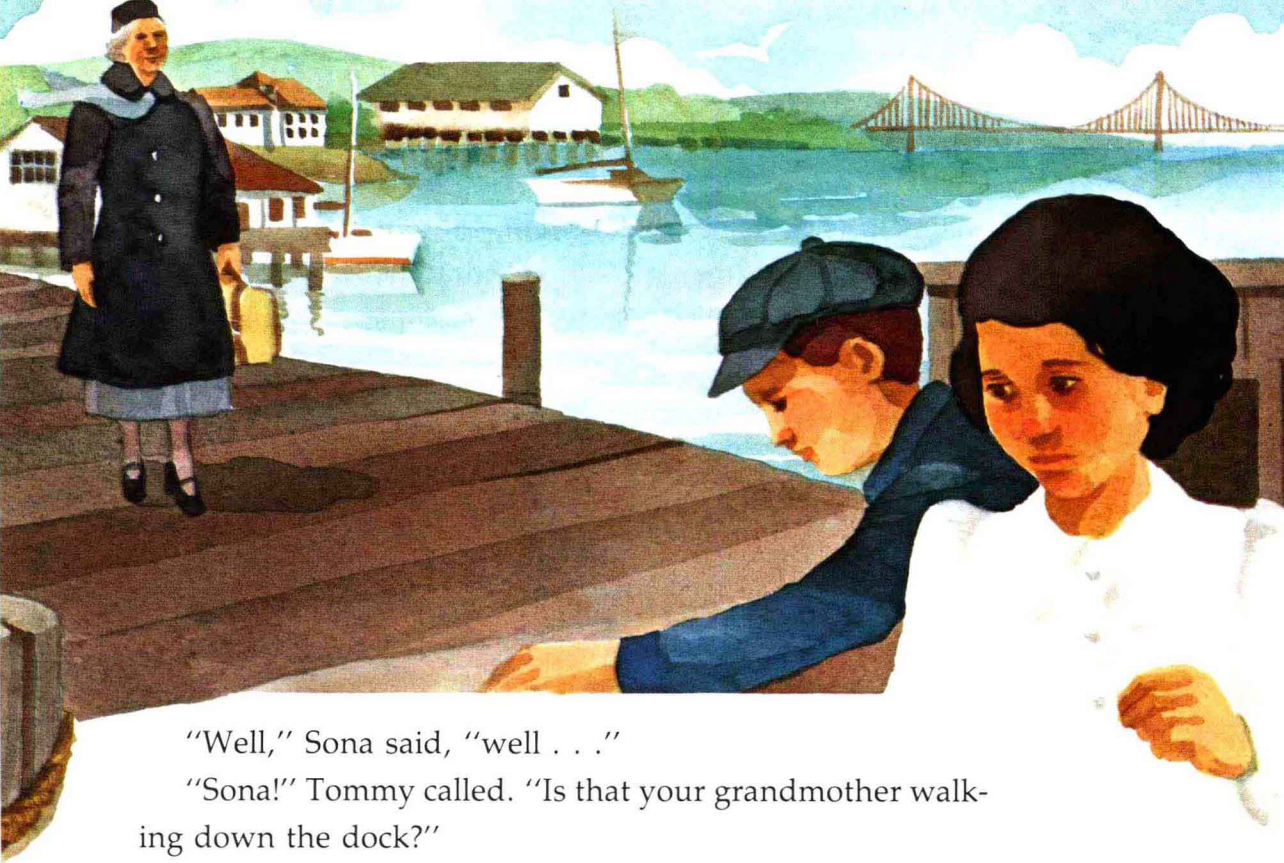
Mr. O'Brien would feel sure she had permission to sail. He would never guess. . . . She decided not to think about it. She couldn't. It was too mixed up.

She ran toward the boat. "Here I am!" she called.

"Ah, the crew," said Jerry O'Brien. "Welcome aboard! Can you handle the jib?"

"Sure!" said Sona. She shook the jib sail out of its bag and clambered over the top of the cabin. She snapped the jib onto the tall forestay.

"Good work," Mr. O'Brien said. "You remembered everything. I hope someone from your family is coming."



"Well," Sona said, "well . . ."

"Sona!" Tommy called. "Is that your grandmother walking down the dock?"

"It can't be!" Sona said. She pulled her breath in. It was.

There was Nana, in her black coat and her little black hat, scarf blowing in the wind. There walked Nana, her back straight and her step brisk. But somehow to Sona she looked small and alone.

"Say," Mr. O'Brien said, "it's good of her to come to see us off. I'll feel better, too, knowing her personally."

Sona didn't answer. She slid down into the cockpit and peered out. She wondered if there was a better place to hide. She couldn't face Nana.

"What's she carrying?" Tommy asked.

"That's her satchel," Sona said.

"What's in it?" Tommy asked.

"Sometimes treats," Sona said. "But I don't think she'll have treats today."

"Why not?" Jerry O'Brien said. "It's a special day."

Nana looked carefully at each boat she passed. She came nearer and nearer. It was getting too late for Sona to run.

But suddenly she did run. Straight to her grandmother.

"Oh, Nana," she said as she threw her arms around her, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run away!"

Nana looked down at Sona's face and nodded gently. She put her satchel down and gave Sona a hug. For a long moment neither one spoke.

"Never mind," Nana said finally. "I have been wrong too. I know you have never deceived me before. So I had to think—what has driven you to it this time? I know, I left you with too hard a choice. And we did not talk about it enough. Now, never mind. I have come to see this *North Star*, and to meet the sailor, O'Brien."

"A pleasure, ma'am," called Jerry O'Brien. "I hope you'll sail with us."

"There is room?" Nana asked.

"Certainly," Jerry O'Brien said. "Sails four easily. Even five."

"Oh, Nana," Sona said, "you don't have to. Not for me. I don't think you'll like it."

Nana looked at her sternly. "I came to this country on a big ship," she said. "I sailed before you were born."

"Good for you," said Jerry O'Brien. "That settles it." He reached out and helped her onto the boat. "Welcome aboard," he said.

Margaret King–Cab Driver

Suzanne Seed

Interviewer: What made you want to become a cab driver?

Margaret King: I took pride in driving well, for I had to wait until I had a car to learn to drive, and that was rather late in coming. When I finally learned, it was something I really enjoyed and still enjoy. I remembered how sharp those cab drivers had seemed—driving so well, and dressed so neatly in their uniforms—and I thought I'd like to do that myself.

Interviewer: What did you find hardest about becoming a cab driver?

Margaret King: I can remember when I was learning to drive—it was scary. I didn't know yet how to judge distance, and when a big truck came near it seemed like its wheels would just come right over me. I admired how cab drivers moved out just perfectly into the traffic and knew exactly where they were going. Soon I learned to judge distance. I began looking ahead, stopped worrying about trucks and about what was moving on either side, and just took off.

Interviewer: What does it take to become a cab driver?

Margaret King: Besides driving well, the most important thing a cab driver needs to know is the streets, and I knew the city well because I had lived in it for a long time. I knew all the main streets, and even the side streets, though I found some just a block long that I had never heard of before.

When I applied for the job, I was given a written test of the streets and main buildings. It's necessary to have a driver's license, and to have a good driving record. You must be at least eighteen, and of course, you should really like driving. After my written test, I was taken out in a cab and asked to demonstrate that I could drive it. Then I was given papers telling me what was expected of me, and I had the job.

Interviewer: How did your friends and children react to your new job?