

Leonie Looping – The Secret on the Balcony

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Leo and her Friends

1. Oh no, it's the holidays!

Although it is a sunny day, you can see the moon faintly in the sky.

An aeroplane flies beside it.

'Are my parents sitting on that plane right now?', Leo asks herself, as she is wrenched out of her thoughts by a deep voice.

'Tickets please!'

Leo rummages in her rucksack for the ticket and shows it to the conductor. He nods briefly and then continues to fight his way through the busy train.

'They're probably all going to the lake to swim', thinks Leo. She casts a jealous glance at the family sitting opposite her. The mother is carrying a large basket containing napkins and delicious treats. Her daughter has a huge inflatable dolphin with her.

The little girl looks exactly like her mother, only smaller. Leo sticks her tongue out at her. **Waaaaah!**

'Mummyyyy...' complains the little girl. Leo quickly picks up her rucksack and pushes her way towards the exit. She has to get off now anyway.

Grandma Anni is already waiting at the station. As usual, she is wearing the polka dot dress that she sewed herself. On her head is her old motorbike helmet, with a sort of pair of ski goggles attached.

'Well my little butterfly, did you have a good journey?', she asks, while Leo cuddles her affectionately.

Leo nods hesitantly. As she does so, her pigtails wiggle through the air.

‘You’ve grown really big! And you’re looking more and more like your mother!’, exclaims Grandma Anni happily. Leo doesn’t want to think about her Mum at all right now. She is still hopping mad at her parents. They promised her they’d spend the holidays at the beach this year. And still, zilch! She has to spend them with Grandma Anni, again! Because her parents had to fly to Stockholm for some important mission. Leo sighs and only half listens while Grandma Anni talks about her plants and the neighbours. ‘Unfortunately, the Schröders are on holiday! You always played so beautifully with those children! But we have new neighbours, they’re also very nice...’

At the corner stands Grandma Anni’s scooter. Smiling, Grandma hands Leo a helmet and helps her climb aboard. Then she turns the key. ‘Hold tight, Leo!’, she cries.

Grandma Anni puts her goggles on and pulls out. A few children wave after them, laughing.

‘1,2,3,4...’ Half lost in thought, Leo counts the houses as they speed past them. And soon she spots the familiar blue windows. ‘Somehow, I feel at home here too’, thinks Leo. Grandma parks in front of the house with the number seven.

Grandma Anni lives on the second floor. **Woosh!** In the stairwell, a young boy barges into Leo and whizzes past them. He is about the same age as her.

‘Hey, can’t you watch out?’, Leo grumbled at him.

“Scuse me’, he cries, grinning, and then he is gone.

‘That’s the new neighbour’s son!’, says Grandma Anni. ‘He is called Florian. A nice boy’.

‘A stupid head’, thinks Leo.

Splash, splash! comes a dull noise from outside. Leo looks through the window and sees the caretaker trying to flatten a mole hill with a spade. ‘How mean!’ thinks Leo. ‘Moles have to live somewhere too...’

Upstairs in the flat it smells of cake and cocoa. There comes a **Miaowwww!** ‘Flakes!’, cries Leo. Grandma’s little tomcat appears almost as clumsy as a baby. Leo likes cats very much. And all animals, come to think of it. Maybe she will become a vet one day? Eventually, she goes into her Mum’s childhood bedroom, chucks her rucksack into the corner and throws herself onto the bed. It’s not long before Grandma calls: ‘Leo dear, are you coming to eat?’ There is rice pudding with cinnamon. Delicious! That always tastes like Christmas, even when it’s summer. Leo likes that. Maybe spending the holidays with Grandma Anni won’t be so bad after all...

2. The Forbidden Balcony

'**Grandmaaaaa?**', cries Leo as she comes out of her room the next morning. No answer. Leo walks through the living room, but Grandma is nowhere to be seen.

'Grandma?'

Still no answer.

Then she discovers a note on the kitchen table:

Leo darling,

I have to nip into town. Help yourself to breakfast! There's cocoa in the fridge. You know what to do. You can do whatever you like, but please don't go on the balcony. I'll be back in the afternoon.

Kisses, from Grandma

Nipped out. Until this afternoon. Oh, brilliant! Leo notices that tears are welling up inside her. First her parents abandon her, and now her Grandma too. Just don't cry. Do not, under any circumstances, cry! Leo goes to the fridge. 'Before', thinks Leo, 'before, Grandma used to warm up the cocoa for me.'

Flakes lies on the sofa and dozes. As Leo strokes the little tomcat, he purrs and lolls around. Then he jumps up and leaps off the sofa. 'Now you too!', thinks Leo, and the lump in her throat gets even bigger.

'Why, of all things, do I have to be stuck in this flat for the summer holidays? It's all so unfair!', mutters Leo and, bored, turns on the TV. Of course, all the programmes are complete rubbish.

'**Achoo!**', Leo has to sneeze, as a sunbeam tickles her nose. The weather outside is truly lovely. Leo would so like to be out in the sun right now! Technically, she's not allowed on the balcony. But what's the worst that could happen? After all, she's not a little kid anymore! Leo turns off the TV again and stands up. With a push, she opens the door to the balcony.

It is beautiful on Grandma's balcony. In the large flower pots, there are roses and other flowers. The dense green leaves have already grown up to the ceiling. Leo feels almost as though she is in the jungle.

'Well I never, what's that then?' Among the plants, she discovers a little house, a tiny deck chair and even a tiny sun shade... It all reminds Leo of Dad's miniature railway in the cellar. 'Grandma's got time for this miniature stuff', thinks Leo. 'But not for me.'

Angrily, she begins to explore the mini garden with her fingers. She feels like King Kong. She saw the giant ape in a film once. Leo would really like to destroy the flower pot, or throw it off the balcony. Why not? If she really upset Grandma, she might not be allowed to come here anymore, and her parents would have to come up with something else for her to do... Maybe then she could go on holiday with her friend Mira? Smiling, she crushes one of the little houses. It cracks quietly. 'That's what Grandma gets for leaving me on my own,' thinks Leo.

Suddenly, something buzzes out of the plants and flutters agitatedly around Leo's nose. Leo swipes it quickly out of her face. The insect lands on the ground and flutters about in a circle, confused.

'Hey, be careful!', it cheeps.

'Am I dreaming, now, in the middle of the day?', Leo asks herself. 'Did that little creature really just shout?'

Curious, she moves closer to it. The thing looks really very strange! 'What are you then? A butterfly? Don't butterflies usually have six legs?', Leo mutters to herself.

'Butterflies do, but butterfly elves have two legs...and two arms!', it chirps sulkily.

Leo doesn't trust her own ears. 'You can speak?'

'And you too!'

'Oh! Did I hurt you?'

'It's ok. We butterfly elves are very tough', the elf replies, knocking the dirt off her tiny shoulders.

3. The Thing that's like Wiggling your Ears

Carefully, Leo picks up the butterfly elf and takes a closer look at her: she looks like a little girl and is about the size of one of Leo's hair clips. She has tiny eyes, ears and even hair, which sticks out wildly from her head.

'You are truly tiny!', declares Leo, astounded.

'So are you! For a human, at least.' The butterfly elf grins.

'But I'm still growing!', Leo defends herself, turning up her nose. 'Oh, by the way, I'm Leonie Lupinski. My friends call me Leo.'

The elf nods. 'Cool! As you already know, I'm a butterfly elf. And butterfly elves are very special! My name is Esmeralda Lakritzia von Midgehouse! But my friends call me Midge.'

The butterfly elf bows.

'Are you named after the insect?', wonders Leo.

'I don't know what you're talking about!', says Midge, adjusting her wings. They are quite rumpled from the crash.

'Oh, elf trumps, not again!', she swears. 'I won't be able to fly properly for hours! And my beautiful house...totally destroyed!'

'I'm very sorry. I was angry, because my parents abandoned me and my Grandma too and...'

Midge turns indignantly in the air and lands angrily on Leo's hand again.

'And that's why you ruined my home?' The little butterfly elf kicks Leo's thumb. It tickles slightly.

'I'm really sorry!', says Leo. 'I didn't know you lived here!'

Midge narrows her eyes and looks at Leo thoughtfully for a moment.

'Okay then', she says eventually, 'you can help me to sort everything out again!'

'Of course!', says Leo and smiles. 'I can help you to build the little house again, no problem!' But as she goes to pick up one of the tiny pieces of wood, Leo accidentally tears down the last remaining wall.

'That's the last straw!', says Midge, crossly. 'You're far too heavy-handed. I'll give you something to help with that.'

With her crumpled wings, the butterfly elf flutters unsteadily into her flower pot. Soon, she comes back with a pea that looks as big as a football in her tiny hands.

‘Here’, she calls, as she holds out the pea to Leo, ‘eat this! It will help us with our problems!’

Leo takes the pea between her forefinger and thumb, hesitates for a moment and then finally puts the pea in her mouth. She chews it briefly and then bravely swallows it down. ‘It tastes strange!’, she says and scrunches up her face. All at once, she feels dizzy and begins to tingle all over.

Everything grows... The flower pots, the railings, the table, Grandma’s deck chair...

‘What’s happening to me?’, cries Leo, hearing her voice become more and more high and squeaky.

‘You’re shrinking!’, laughs Midge. ‘You ate a **shrinking pea!**’ The butterfly elf lands on the floor of the balcony next to the confused Leo.

‘And what’s this?’, asks Leo, feeling her back.

‘Wings!’, answers Midge, with a grin.

Alarmed, Leo gapes at the butterfly elf: ‘Will these...um...wings...go away again?’

‘When you become big again, they will disappear.’

Leo breathes out, relieved. Then it occurs to her that her Grandma is will be back again this afternoon. ‘When will that be, exactly? When I get big again?’

Midge makes a guess with her thumb against the sun. ‘So, in about...if not a bit longer...it’s always different...’

Midge’s cheeks redden slightly. ‘I haven’t actually been able to rack up any experience with little humans and shrinking peas yet. But it doesn’t matter! Come, we have a lot to do.’ Fluttering, Midge takes off from the ground.

‘What about me?’, cries Leo.

‘Well, use your wings!’

Leo tries to move her wings.

But nothing happens.

‘It’s not working!’, moans Leo.

‘It’s like **wiggling your ears!** Try them one at a time!’

Leo strains really hard. Eventually, the wing quivers slightly.

Good, now the other one. That one swings a little more.

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After a few minutes, Leo can manage a whole wing beat with each wing, and only a little later she takes off from the ground.

Still uncertain, she flies after Midge, who is already waiting for her in the flower pot.

The little house looks chaotic. Bits of it are lying all around. 'Now that I'm small', says Leo, 'a tiny problem has turned into a big one!'