

From Anna

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JEAN LITTLE

With a foreword by Katherine Paterson

Cover illustration by Byron Eggenschwiler

Interior illustrations by Joan Sandin

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*For Anne
with my love.*

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Introduction

Jean Little has often been called “Canada’s most beloved writer of children’s literature,” and one has only to read *From Anna* to understand why. For decades now, young Anna Solden has been warming the hearts of readers of every age and description. If you long for a book about a strong, loving family (and they are rare these days), this is your book. If you, or a loved one, are struggling with an unrecognized disability, this is your book. If you are teased by your more able siblings or put down at school, this is your book. If you are forced to leave the only home you know to move to a strange new setting, this is your book. If you are an outsider, longing for love and understanding . . .

Obviously, I could go on and on.

Jean Little has been a special friend of mine for many years, and I first read *From Anna* in the earliest years of our friendship. I remember that I had really liked the book more than twenty-five years ago, but I was unprepared for my response to the story this time around. The book has not aged at all. It is as fresh and real as it ever was, but I have aged, and as I reread Anna’s story I found myself repeatedly blinking back tears.

What more can I say? *From Anna* is a lovely book. If you haven’t read it before, do, it will warm your heart. If you have, read it again. It will refresh your soul.

— Katherine Paterson
Barre, Vermont, 2012

This story begins in Germany in the year 1933, a time in that country's history when many of its citizens were being denied personal freedoms and it was dangerous for anyone to speak out against such injustice. Some Germans, like Anna's father, became so worried about the future they took their families and moved to a new world.

ONE

A Song for Herr Keppler

Let it really be Papa, Anna wished desperately as she tugged open the big front door. Let me be right.

She wanted to run down the steps but they were uneven and she had fallen headlong down them before now. That was no way to meet Papa, landing at his feet upside down and with a fresh batch of bruises. The moment she was on flat ground, however, she ran. Then she was close enough to be sure — and she *was* right.

“Papa, Papa!” she cried in delight, flinging her arms around his middle and hugging him. The next instant she was trying to get away. She, Anna, never grabbed people like that, not right out on the street where anyone could see. But Papa had dropped his briefcase and was hugging her back so hard you could tell he would not mind if all the world were watching.

“Stop, stop! You’re breaking my bones,” Anna gasped at last.

Laughing, he let go of her. At once she became very busy picking up the briefcase, dusting it off with part of her skirt and giving it back to him. She kept her head bent so he would not catch her joy at being the first to meet him, at the wonderful hug, at everything. But Papa guessed. He reached down and captured one of her hands and swung it in his as they started for the house.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

Anna scowled. Why were the older four always so important? And yet of course he would wonder. She could not remember ever before having been the only one to meet him. Always Gretchen or Rudi, Fritz or Frieda, or even all four, had been there too.

“They’re busy fighting about what happened in school today,” she explained. “But I sat on the windowsill and watched until I saw you coming.”

She was dragging her feet now. She so wanted him to herself a few moments longer.

“What happened in school?” he asked. He let go of her hand, and they both stopped walking while he waited to hear. Without thinking about it, Anna reached up and jerked on one of her thin braids. It was a habit she had when she was worried.

“Don’t, Anna,” Papa warned. “It’ll come undone.”

He was too late. Anna looked down in dismay at the crumpled ribbon in her fist. So often Mama begged her to leave her hair alone. So often she forgot.

“Maybe I can fix it,” Papa said. “I can try anyway.”

Anna turned her back and held the ribbon up over her shoulder to him. Awkwardly he bundled together the loose hair into one strand. Her mother was right about it being difficult. Wisps of it kept slipping away from him. But at last, while Anna clutched the end, he tied a lopsided bow around the middle. He frowned at it. He had made no attempt to rebraid it and it looked all wrong. Anna knew how it looked as well as he did, but she told herself she did not care. Even when it was newly done by Mama herself, it never looked just right, like Gretchen’s smooth, gleaming thick braids.

“About school, Papa,” she reminded him, turning around.

Papa forgot her hair too.

“What happened?”

For one instant, Anna hesitated. It was really Gretchen’s story, not hers. But Gretchen and the rest so often had something to tell. There was never anything she, Anna, could say about her troubled days in Frau Schmidt’s class. Anyway, it was Gretchen’s own fault she hadn’t been watching out for Papa!

“We were all at Assembly,” Anna plunged in. “We always have Assembly before we start classes and we sing then. We get to choose a couple of the songs. The older children, that is. This morning it was Gretchen’s turn and she asked for ‘*Die Gedanken sind frei.*’ The whole school

knows it except for the younger children. I'm the only one in my class who knows it all."

Anna paused, proud of her knowledge and remembering the day Papa had taught her the song, when she was only five years old. He had explained the proud words until she understood them and then they had marched along together, singing it. *Die Gedanken sind frei*. It meant "thoughts are free."

"So what happened?" Papa said again.

"Well, Herr Keppler . . . You know, Papa, he's the new Headmaster the government sent after Herr Jakobsohn left."

Papa nodded, and his face darkened. He and Herr Jakobsohn had been friends. They had played chess together. But the Jakobsohns had gone to America three weeks ago.

"Herr Keppler just said, 'We will not sing that song in this school again.' Fräulein Braun had already started to play the beginning to get us started and nobody knew what to do. Gretchen was still standing up and she went all red and said right out loud, 'Why?' That was brave of her, Papa. Everybody is frightened of Herr Keppler. When Rudi says he isn't, he's lying."

"What answer did Herr Keppler give Gretchen?" Papa said.

He sounded angry, almost as though he already knew.

“He didn’t answer her at all,” Anna said. She was still surprised as she thought back. “I mean, he didn’t give any reason. He just looked at her and said, ‘Sit down.’” The command came sharply from Anna’s lips as she imitated the Headmaster.

“Rudi says maybe Herr Keppler just doesn’t like that song and that it didn’t mean anything special . . . ” Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

“What did you sing instead?” Papa asked, beginning, once again, to move slowly toward the house. As they walked, he looked not at her but at the ground.

“*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.*”

They were at the steps now. Their time alone was almost over. Anna’s shoulders drooped.

Then all at once, Papa threw back his head, stood still, and started to sing.

Die Gedanken sind frei,
My thoughts freely flower.
Die Gedanken sind frei,
My thoughts give me power.
No scholar can map them.
No hunter can trap them.
No man can deny
Die Gedanken sind frei.

How could Herr Keppler not like words like that?

Or the tune, either? It rang out in the quiet street. Anna joined in the second verse. She sang with all her might, just the way Papa did, as if every phrase mattered.

*So I think as I please
And this gives me pleasure;
My conscience decrees
This right I must treasure;*

At that, Anna heard them coming — Rudi leaping down the stairs two at a time, Gretchen hurrying after him, the twins tumbling behind the older two. The door burst open. The four of them looked at their sister and their father. Then, all together, they were singing too.

*My thoughts will not cater
To duke or dictator,
My thoughts freely fly.
Die Gedanken sind frei.*

“Papa, did Anna tell you . . . ?” Gretchen cut in. But Papa was leading the way in, still singing. They followed him as though he were the Pied Piper of Hamelin town, and all of them joined in the wonderful last verse.

*And if tyrants take me
And throw me in prison,*

*My thoughts will burst free,
Like blossoms in season.
Foundations will crumble.
The structure will tumble.
And free men will cry,
“Die Gedanken sind frei!”*

They finished the song in the downstairs hall. Mama put her head over the stairwell and glared down at them.

“Ernst, have you lost your mind?” she demanded. “Little Trudi Grossman had been sick all day and Minna has just got her to sleep. What were you thinking of anyway, making such a racket?”

They had climbed up to her by that time. Papa caught her around the waist and kissed her so that she blushed. He was laughing now, though sorry too about perhaps disturbing the baby. But no wakening wail came from the downstairs apartment, so maybe that was all right.

“One last fling, Klara,” he told her. “One song for Herr Keppler, who cannot keep me from singing with my own children yet.”

“What nonsense!” Mama scoffed, freeing herself.

“Anna did tell you!” Gretchen cried.

Anna looked at her feet. But she was still glad she had been the one to let Papa know all about it.

“Yes. Anna told me.” Papa’s voice was heavy and tired suddenly. The fun was over.

“But it doesn’t mean anything, Papa, does it?” Rudi asked. Earlier he had been certain, but now he sounded shaken.

“I tell you it does.” Gretchen, usually so calm, was near tears. “It wasn’t just the way he spoke to me. You should have seen the look he gave Fräulein Braun. Her hands started to shake. I saw. I thought she wasn’t going to be able to play our national anthem.”

“And I keep trying and trying to tell you all that that’s not the worst thing that happened today,” Fritz burst out. “Well, I guess it didn’t happen today exactly — but Max Hoffman’s father has disappeared! Vanished! He’s been gone for three days.”

He waited for them to gasp at this news. To Fritz, it was exciting but not real. He had not spoken to Max himself. Another boy had told him. Anna, though, had talked to Gerda, Max’s sister. She stood there remembering Gerda’s face, swollen from crying.

“Which Hoffmans are you talking about?” Mama said, on her way back to the stove. “Nobody we know would do a thing like that to his family. It’s a disgrace.”

“But he didn’t . . .” Anna started, forgetting, this once, that she was the youngest, remembering only Gerda’s wounded eyes. “I mean, it wasn’t like that. Gerda told me.”

“Oh, Anna Solden, look at your hair!” Mama interrupted.

Her mind still on Gerda, Anna paid no attention. She had to make them see, make them understand. Then maybe Papa could help somehow.

“The Hoffmans had supper waiting. On the table even. And they waited and waited and Herr Hoffman just didn’t come. And when Frau Hoffman went to the police, they would hardly even listen, Gerda said. They told her to go on home and keep quiet about it.”

Papa was really listening to her. He looked as troubled as she felt. But Mama laughed.

“The police know these things happen,” she said. “I don’t suppose she’s the first wife that’s gone to them looking for a runaway husband. But really, what could have happened to him? He could come home if he wanted to — unless he had an accident or a heart attack or something. I suppose she checked the hospitals?”

“I guess so,” Anna mumbled.

She knew so little, really.

“He has been gone three days,” she added.

“I already said that,” Fritz said.

“It’s no accident then,” Mama dismissed the whole thing. She put down the steaming dish she was holding.

“Come on now. Forget Herr Hoffman while the food is good and hot,” she told her family. “He’s probably having a fine supper himself somewhere. Leave that bow alone, Anna. I’ll fix it later.”

Papa sat down in his big chair. The others took their

places. All heads were bowed for the blessing. Then, just when they thought their father had finished, he added, "And, dear Father God, have mercy on the Hoffman family tonight and on this troubled country and . . . on all children, in Jesus' name, Amen."

They raised their heads and stared at him.

Mama was the one to speak.

"Ernst, what is this that you are talking about? There have been many people out of work, it is true, and everything has been expensive. But the troubled times are ending. Everyone knows that."

Anna looked at her father. He would know. He would set her fears at rest at last. What must it be like to sit at the window and watch for Papa and never see him come? The thought had haunted her all day. Papa picked up his fork slowly.

"The troubled times . . ." he said. "I think they are just beginning. We are seeing only a faint shadow of the darkness that threatens us."

"Ernst!" Mama cried, horrified at his words and the sorrow in his face and understanding little more than Anna did.

"Never mind now, Klara," Papa said. "This is not the time to talk."

But Anna was shaken to the core. Her father was afraid. He could not comfort her after all. And she had not even told him everything.

“Frau Hoffman wanted Gerda to ask Herr Keppler for help,” she said now. “But Max wouldn’t go to him and Gerda doesn’t want to either. Papa, what should they do?”

“Herr Keppler will not help,” Papa said, the same darkness in his voice that she had seen on his face earlier. Then he smiled at her. It was a smile of love, but with no hope in it.

“I will go and talk to Frau Hoffman and see if I can do anything,” he promised.

He was still afraid though. Anna did not know how she knew. Maybe because she was so often frightened herself. If only she could comfort him somehow!

She took a mouthful while she thought hard. Then an idea came. She was not sure whether it was a good idea or not. Papa was eating now too. She reached out quietly and touched his hand so that he looked at her again. She did not want the others to hear. They might laugh. Rudi often said she was crazy.

But Mama’s cabbage rolls were too good to keep waiting, no matter how serious life might be. Nobody was paying any attention to her except her father.

“‘Thoughts are free,’ Papa,” Anna said softly.

Papa’s head came up. He smiled right at her, a real smile this time, and cupped his large hand around her small one, giving it a good warm squeeze.

“No matter what I have to do, I’ll keep it that way for you, my Anna,” he promised her.

Anna did not know what he meant. What could he have to do? Did he mean talking to Frau Hoffman? Or something else?

She could not answer herself but she did know that she had said the right thing. Not Rudi or Gretchen or Fritz or Frieda, but she, Anna! Happily, she took another bite.