Anna Mae

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Abstract

Anna Mae scooped the chicken mash out of the blue printed sack into the feed bucket...
dent led the Brothers in the closing chant. "We bind men together in a brotherhood based on certain immutable principles with a bond as strong as right itself. We know no north, no south, no east, no west but man as man."

"Meeting adjourned."

Clair Calhoon

Anna Mae

Anna Mae scooped the chicken mash out of the blue printed sack into the feed bucket. She wheezed as the white dust puffed into her nose.

"Hurry, Annie . . . the school bus is coming."

Anna Mae emptied the bucket into the long trough and hurried through the squawking chickens to the house.

"Here's your lunch bucket . . . now don't forget to get me some brown thread and a can of baking powder. John, open the gate for Annie," called the short, pudgy woman, Anna's mother.

Anna nodded goodbye. She didn't run to the bus. The kids would like that. She knew how they tittered behind cupped hands at the way the hanging fat from her arms and the overlapping folds of her stomach jiggled when she moved too suddenly.

"Bye, Pa," she mechanically muttered as she hurried through the gate. Pa looked across the road, deep into the next field. Pa hadn't said goodbye since she had started to high school two years before. Pa didn't believe in girls going to school. He had damned the law that said she had to go until she was sixteen. Now she was sixteen and he cussed more because she didn't quit and stay home and help with the work. But that was what Aunt Effie had done. Aunt Effie was an old maid. Anna didn't want that.

Anna lifted her pounds up the bus steps. She tried not to hear the usual titters.

'Oh, darn. I gotta walk clear to the back and sit with that Wilkins boy!' With lowered eyes she shuffled to the back. An elbow accidentally poked her in the ribs.

The Wilkins boy shoved himself next to the window.
Anna eased herself down, aiming for as close to the aisle edge as possible. But she fit the seat perfectly. She cringed as her leg touched the side of the Wilkins boy. She could not draw her leg away by crossing it . . . her dress was too tight. The Wilkins boy couldn't draw his leg away either. Anna Mae giggled to herself. The Wilkins boy was even fatter than she was. There wasn't room for him to move his spreading legs that looked like giant drumsticks.

Anna Mae picked at the paint on her lunch pail. The paint was almost gone. She liked to chip at it while sitting with someone because she could never think of anything to say. She could say, "Oh, how nice you look today," "How's the world treatin' you today?" but there the conversation stopped with a dead thud. Across the aisle Madge was telling Pinkie about the lavender chiffon dress she was going to wear to the dance Friday night. Anna's imagination flashed pictures of Madge . . . slim and graceful . . . swirling in a cloud of lavender chiffon with some mysterious out-of-the-county boy. She thought she heard her name.

"Anna, Didn't ja hear me?"
"Huh." She blushed pink as she looked at the Wilkins boy.

"Whyn't yas go to the dance with me?"

Anna Mae's breath stopped. A boy, a real boy was asking her to a dance! A confusion of thoughts rushed and tumbled through her spinning head.

"If'n I heard right . . . but I can't dance." (There's that blue satin at Franklins fer a dress. Pa wouldn't let me. And I never had a satin dress before. Ma wouldn't tell him though.)

"Well, wontcha go?"

Anna Mae looked down at her hands. Her eyes fell on his huge legs, and his giant boots stained with green stuff.

'I can't act greedy . . . he knows I never had a date before.'

"I'll ask my pa," she mumbled. 'Maybe he'll forget' . . . "I'll tell you tomorrow noon at 12:15 at my locker," she quickly added.

The Wilkins boy nodded and turned to look out the window. Anna noticed that his ears were pink too. And she was left to her own thoughts.
‘A real dance in four whole days! Ma’d be proud. Gosh, I’m glad I didn’t quit school yesterday when the kids teased me about eatin’ a malt at the Sugar Bowl.’ Pained memories of the other times she had been tempted to yield to her father and quit because of the incessant teasing flashed over her mind. The time when she had forgotten the music at the school operetta. They said her fingers were too big to hit the piano keys anyway.

‘Td be home working ’stead of going to the dance Friday night. Ma knows the polka and the Merry Widow waltz . . . she can learn me. And she can help me write down things to say!’

Anna dared to look at the Wilkins boy out of the corner of her eyes. He was rubbing the knee of his blue denim overalls with his big palm. Sweat spots were beginning to show through his blue chambray shirt.

‘He must like blue . . . if I could wear Ma’s blue Sunday shoes, and if Franklins still has that blue satin . . .’

The bus jerked to a stop in front of the school. Anna scuffled off alone, as usual, to class. She didn’t know how she could wait until noon to go downtown to pick out the material.

Franklins store still had the blue satin. She could see it through the window. But Madge and two other girls were in there feeling and talking about other materials.

‘I’ll go down and get Ma’s baking powder.’

The girls were still there when she got back.

‘I just have to get it put away this noon before it’s sold.’ She hesitated, pushed the heavy glass door open, and shuffled to the counter, hoping the girls wouldn’t look up and see her.

“Hellooo, Anna,” sang the thin-faced woman at the counter. “How’s yer maw? What ya going to git for her today?”

“What brown No. 50 thread, please.”

While the clerk was getting the thread, Anna Mae felt the blue satin. It was smooth and soft like a cat’s cheek. ‘It’s even more pretty than that lavender chiffon Madge is buying.’ Anna Mae felt a strange but sure and defiant courage. “And put away five yards of this blue satin . . . for a dress . . . for me . . . for the dance Friday night. I’ll bring the money tomorrow.”
Madge dropped her chiffon. The clerk’s mouth went into a puckered oval of surprise under her beaked nose.

“You—you’re going to the dance, Anna Mae?” Madge edged up to Anna at the counter.

“Y-Yes . . . with Clifford Wilkins.” Her courage was not so sure now. She waited to hear a laugh of teasing comment.

“You’ll look real nice in blue, Anna.” Madge stroked the blue satin. “How are you going to make it?”

Anna, confused, walked to the pattern book, thumbed through the pages, and pointed at a pattern that featured a loose ruffle around the neck, full skirt, and draping sash.

“That’s pretty,” approved Madge. The other two mumbled agreement.

“Guess we will see you there, then,” Madge said as they headed for the door.

‘They like me now.’ Anna’s heart sang. ‘Just cause I gotta date . . . (You’ll look nice in blue)’ — the words tasted sweet.

The next afternoon Anna smoothed out four ragged dollar bills and stacked some piles of odd change on the counter. It was her own egg money. Ma let her keep the money from the eggs she found in hidden nests around the farm. It had taken a long time to save so much, and she was glad to be spending it for the blue satin.

That night Anna rushed home to show Ma the material. Ma was proud. She hid it in the bottom of the mending basket and promised to work on it the next day while Pa was in the field. Then Ma closed the kitchen door and showed Anna the steps to the Merry Widow waltz. In the next three days Anna hurried from the school bus to peep under the clothes in the mending basket to see how much Ma had sewed on the dress. Ma was slow. It had been raining and Pa didn’t go out long enough.

Anna practiced her steps while getting the eggs, while carrying the water to the chickens, in the lavatory at school, and before going to bed. Pa asked Ma why Anna was acting so happy. Ma said that all girls acted that way in the spring, but Pa scowled suspiciously at Anna.

Friday night when Anna peeped into the mending basket, the dress was gone. ‘Pa’s found it’ she screamed to herself.
But Ma, coming in with a bundle of rhubarb, winked and pointed upstairs. Anna puffed up the steps. There it was hanging on the closet door . . . finished . . . even the hem. Anna put it in front of her and stepped in front of the mirror. 'It's the prettiest dress I ever had.' She danced a few steps and curtseyed to herself.

"Supper, Anna." Ma was having supper early so she and Pa could go to the Grange meeting. Anna was to stay home since she had been looking a little peaked lately.

Anna stared at her pork chop. 'I can't remember the steps.' Desperately she moved her feet through the box-like pattern. 'There it is,' she grinned smugly to herself.

"What's she got that God-awful, cow-eyed expression on her face for?" Pa was not in a good mood that night.

"Pa, I been thinking all day it feels like rain," Ma said, trying to get his attention elsewhere.

"Uh? — Oh, that's what I been thinkin'." He went to the door and stared at the black cumulus cloud darkening the sky. "Ma, I'm callin' Ed and tellin' him we ain't comin' tonight. One more rain and the bottom will drop out of the road."

Ma looked dismayed. "Pa, we missed the last meeting." Pa snorted and headed for the phone.

Anna Mae's blood pounded through her heart in fright. Her mouth grew dry and she could not swallow the bite of muffin in her mouth. Her week's sweet dream had suddenly turned into a nightmare.

"Ma—" Ma was the only one now that could bring back that good dream. "It'll be all right, honey." She patted Anna's hand. "Help me with the dishes and then go up and-ah-study." She watched Anna climb the stairs. She knew how much going to the dance meant to Anna, and how much Anna was depending on her. She must not let Anna sense the fear and doubt that caught at her own heart.

Upstairs Anna scrubbed her face till it burned red. She heard the plink of rain on the tin roof. Ma had said that it would be all right. Ma's words made Anna feel safe and sure. Ma wasn't even worried—or—or was she? Ma always knew. She unbraid her hair and brushed it with long strokes. The ripples set by years of braids glistened in the
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lamplight. She pulled it back to tie it with a blue ribbon, as Madge did.

Ma had given her some powder and lipstick. She wished that Ma was there to help her put it on. In the movies they put it on their top lips and rubbed the two together. Anna carefully drew the lines and rubbed her lips together. A red line lapped over the edge of her bottom lip. She tried to rub it off . . . it smeared down her chin. She took the washrag and scrubbed her face again. This time she drew both lines on. She swerved off line a bit on the top lip, but she was able to cover it with Ma's powder. She put a handkerchief in her mouth, so she wouldn't smear the lipstick on her dress, and let the blue satin slither over her head. Every seam and fold fell in its right place . . . it was a perfect fit. She really did look nice in blue, she thought. She wondered if Clifford Wilkins would whisper that to her.

It was almost eight o'clock. Anna went to the hot air register and clicked it open. Oh, God, Pa was still there. The blood started pounding in her heart again.

"Pa it's going to rain harder. Ya better go out and run in the horses."

"Already did." There was a rattle of newspaper.

But Ma had said it would be all right. Anna tried not to think that Ma might fail her this time. Yet Ma had so little time—.

"Pa, I think I heard the brooder house door blow open."

"Good God, Ma, lemme read."

Then came steps on the front porch, a hesitant knock.

"I'll get it, Pa."

"Not this late, Ma." Anna heard the crumple of the newspaper and Pa's heavy work shoes thud across the room as he went to the door. She twisted and moved her satin sash between her fingers. It could only be Clifford Wilkins. She was afraid to go downstairs and appear before Pa, and afraid to let the Wilkins boy face Pa alone. She went halfway down and clung to the railing on the landing.

"Good God. We got the preacher callin' on us, Ma. No, it's the Wilkins boy, all dolled up. What the hell do you want, Sir?" Pa bowed in mock chivalry. The Wilkins boy's face was scarlet. Glistening beads dotted the freckles on his
forehead.

"Ah . . . ah . . . come for Ann . . ha Mae." His words seemed to sift through cotton.

"My daughter? What the Hell?"

"We was just going to the school dance, Pa." The fat on Anna’s arm quivered as she gripped the railing. She wished she hadn’t said that. She could have said that he was just coming over to help her study.

"So that’s what’s making’ ya sick?" He turned and glowered over the Wilkins boy. "Ya ain’t takin’ no daughter of mine ta one of those neckin’, sinnin’, damned school dances."

Ma begged Pa not to talk so, but her pleading voice was downed in Pa’s torrent.

"Anna don’t want no one hangin’ round her neck. She’s got work to do tomorry. Now git . . . git."

The Wilkins boy darted his cowering eyes at Anna and backed out into the rain.

"Git! And tell that damned Pa of yers ta keep his hogs outa my forty or I’ll shoot ever blasted one of ’em." Pa bellowed after the running boy. Pa slammed the door and turned to head for the steps. Ma grabbed his back suspenders.

"Pa, leave her be a while," she demanded.

From somewhere Anna got the strength to run back upstairs to her room. She hung to the curtain and watched the tail light of the Wilkins truck flicker out in the murky night. It seemed that all her hopes, and plans, and dreams flickered out then too. Clifford Wilkins would never ask her again. Probably no one would ever ask her out again. But there would always be lots of work to do on Pa’s farm. The thought was hopeless and bitter. And Monday they would all laugh and tease like always. They would never let her forget tonight — no they wouldn’t tease her. She wouldn’t let them.

Anna slowly descended the stairs. Pa started to get up but was forced back under the pressure of Ma’s defiant eyes. Anna stood on tip-toe at the phone and rang three longs and one short. She waited, listening to the crackle of the line. She thought of the long, dull hours, of the endless days on the farm. She thought of the cruel, teasing, and cutting jokes at school.

"Hello, Mr. Ed? This is Anna Mae. Ya needn’t wait the
bus on me Monday morning . . . No . . . no, . . . I just ain't
go to school no more.”
She turned and stared at Pa. Pa could not meet her eyes.  

**I Am the People**

I.

I ride the street cars,
The dirty, sweat-smelling street cars everyday.
The poor ones ride with me.
The colored ones,
The Jews,
We dangle from straps that are worn by many hands.
We see more people
Through a window that isn’t open,
That is dirty with the monotony of use.
I see the rich ones ride by in their expensive cars.
I see a girl’s hair blowing across her face in her convertible.
I see the wind making her cool and clean.
I smell the dust and sweat of me.
I ride the street cars.
I am the Gentile.

II.

I am the Jew
Who hurries to catch the street cars.
I am the Jew who owns the corner
Grocery store.
I keep it open on Sunday because other stores are not open.
I stand behind my counter, wearing a dirty apron.
I watch the faces of the people who buy an extra quart of
milk.
I am the Jew who fingers the money
And rides the street cars.
I am the Jew.

III.

I am the Negro whose nose is flat.