

Christine Nöstlinger (Author)

Als mein Vater die Mutter der Anna Lachs heiraten wollte

When My Father Wanted to Marry Anna Salmon's Mother

GENRE | Recommended age: X+ | ISBN: 978-3-7512-0346-3 | Pages: 176

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- Moving, humorous and true to life: Christine Nöstlinger tells, through vivid characters, of family, friendship and change from a child's perspective.
- A story about friendship without prejudice: The unusual relationship between Cornelius and Anna conveys tolerance, solidarity and empathy in an entertaining way.
- Entertaining and full of conversation starters: The exciting plot captivates young readers aged 10 and up and offers numerous starting points for conversations about family and social relationships.

A children's treasure of a book by Christine Nöstlinger! Which is worse? When your father suddenly brings a new woman home or when this new woman also has a daughter, and that daughter is such a cow as Anna, Cornelius asks himself. At least Anna is as unhappy about their parents' relationship as he is. Together, the two simply must think of some way of splitting their parents up. A delightful, heartwarming book by the great Christine Nöstlinger, all about children's worries and prejudices, and about good friends.

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Chapter 1: I Like to Spread Out

Cats, my grandmother claims, can sniff out impending disaster. Many hours before an earthquake, they race around excitedly with bristling fur and flattened ears. Or, a day before floodwater swamps the town, they take refuge in a tall tree.

My gran supposedly even knew a cat that one evening tore through the house, screeching horribly, back and forth, so wildly that everyone thought it had gone mad. The poor creature screeched so loudly that nobody in the house could get to sleep. And that was a very good thing, because at midnight a fire broke out in the kitchen, goodness knows why, and poisonous smoke spread through the whole house. If the people had been sleeping peacefully, they would probably never have woken up again.

Sadly, we don't have a cat at home, because my father gets terrible sneezing fits and a wheezing cough whenever a single cat hair floats through the air. Maybe cats aren't responsible for the kind of disaster that was threatening me anyway, because it had nothing to do with things like fire, floods and earthquakes. It was what my mother calls "interpersonal nastiness". Besides, not even ten cats with the gift of foreseeing that kind of nastiness could have warned me. I was a very naive fool who thought his father was always completely honest with him and kept no secrets from him.

Anyway, I wasn't the least bit suspicious when, on the last day of the winter break, my father said to me: "Son of mine, you're getting a new girl in your class tomorrow. The daughter of a colleague of mine. It would be super nice of you to look after her a little."

I was just cutting up bacon for the spaghetti carbonara. I sighed deeply and muttered, "Shit!" Because the only free seat in my class was the one next to me at my desk. And I like sitting alone at a double desk. I like being able to spread out comfortably. Fitting all my stuff into a measly sixty-five centimetres is hard for me. Even though I'm really not a loner, I don't like it when someone sticks too close to me and I have to listen to their burping, smacking, slurping, nose-blowing and farting up close. And I don't need anyone I could copy my homework from. I'm one of the good ones in the class.

My father misunderstood my muttered "Shit" and said: "Changing schools in the middle of the school year isn't easy. It helps when someone is nice to you right from the start."

I put the little cubes of bacon into the pan and the pan onto the stove. While I stirred the bacon, I said: "Almost everyone in my class is nice. We don't do bullying."

That wasn't entirely true. There are a few kids in my class who never get invited to birthday parties, who get laughed at when they say something stupid, and who mostly stand around by themselves during break. But I'm not sure whether you can really call that bullying.

Over our spaghetti, I asked my father why his colleague's daughter was changing schools in the middle of the school year. Had she maybe done something wrong and been kicked out of her old school? If I had to share my desk with someone anyway, I'd have found it fun to have someone "disreputable" next to me. Nothing special ever happens in my class; we're a club of good little lambs.

But my father dashed that hope. His colleague, he explained, had just moved here from Salzburg with her daughter. Because of the better job they had offered her at the company's head office in Vienna.

I slurped spaghetti into my mouth and said, chewing: "Okay, I'll look after the girl."

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And I meant it completely honestly. After all, it really isn't much fun to suddenly have to move to another city where you don't have any friends.

Chapter 2: I Was Just a Naive Fool

"Stubby, tell me, are you doing your spring cleaning already?" Conny asked me the next morning, a few minutes before eight, as I was clearing out the desk compartment next to my seat and throwing hard bread crusts, rotten apple cores, dried-up tangerine peels, rock-hard chewing-gum balls, pencil-sharpener shavings and crumpled paper tissues into a plastic bag.

At school, everyone calls me Stubby. Even most of the teachers. Adi Bär gave me that nickname in first grade. Back then I was the smallest boy in the class. In the six years since, I've grown quite a bit and now I'm one of the tall ones, but the nickname stuck. And now that I'm no longer the smallest, it doesn't bother me anymore. Besides, it never really fit. A stub, whether it's a pencil stub, a stubby tail or a cigarette stub, is what's left of something that used to be much longer – which was never true of me. But a numbskull like Adi Bär just doesn't know such fine linguistic distinctions.

I wiped the crumbs out of the desk compartment with a paper tissue and said to Conny: "We're getting a new girl today, and the only free seat is next to me, unfortunately."

"Really? In the middle of the school year?" Conny marvelled, and of course she wanted to know how I knew, and I explained it to her, and as soon as I'd explained it, the school bell rang, and hardly had it stopped ringing when our history-Tusnelda, Dr. Wurm, who really is called Tusnelda and is our class teacher, came through the door, and next to her a truly strange girl. Small, a bit overweight, pale skin covered in freckles of all different sizes, rust-red wire-brush hair, drooping shoulders, a thin-lipped crescent mouth turned downwards, and enormous watery-blue eyes. She had no school bag with her. Just a hideous, squeaky-green, shiny shoulder bag that dangled down against her stomach.

Dr. Wurm pushed the strange girl to the front, took a piece of white chalk, wrote ANNA LACHS on the board in big block letters and announced: "This is your new classmate, Anna Lachs. She's coming to us from Salzburg. Be nice to her and help her settle in here." Then she pointed to the free half of the desk next to me and said: "Anna, a lovely little spot is already waiting for you there!"

Anna Lachs walked towards my desk at a snail's pace, plopped down on the chair next to me and shoved her squeaky-green shoulder bag into the desk compartment.

As I'd promised my father, I wanted to be nice and said quietly: "I'm Cornelius Haberkorn, but everyone just calls me Stubby!"

"I don't care, you idiot!" Anna Lachs hissed at me, looking at me as if I were a disgusting insect. So disgusting that you don't squash it because you don't want to touch it.

I was flabbergasted. I had never experienced so much unprovoked rudeness. So I slid my chair as far away from my new neighbour as I could, leaned back and tried to listen to history-Tusnelda, who was reading aloud from a thick book about the Vienna city law of the year 1221 and its cruel punishments for murder and manslaughter.

"If the manslaughter was committed in self-defence," she was just saying, "then the culprit shall submit to trial by fire. If he passes it, he shall go free, but if the fire burns him, he is deemed guilty." Dr. Wurm lowered the thick book, looked around the classroom and asked: "Does anyone know what is meant by this trial by fire?"

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I knew, but I didn't put my hand up. I never volunteer; it's too swotty for me.
Since nobody else raised a hand either, Dr. Wurm explained that trial by fire was a judgement of God, and that the culprit had to carry a glowing iron in his bare hand from the baptismal font of the church to the high altar.

Adi Bär cried indignantly: "But then all the innocent people burned their paws too!"

"Sadly, yes," Dr. Wurm said regretfully, but that wasn't enough for Adi Bär.

"But if nobody ever passed it," he cried, "even the biggest dope must have noticed that this trial by fire is nonsense! Were they all completely bonkers in the Middle Ages?"

Dr. Wurm wasn't willing to discuss the matter any further with Adi Bär and moved on to the city's fire regulations.

I peeked furtively at my neighbour. She was sitting on her chair with her arms crossed over her chest and her head lowered. As if she had fallen into a Sleeping Beauty slumber. She stayed like that the whole morning. She didn't go to the loo, she didn't take any bread out of the squeaky-green shoulder bag during break, and she didn't take out a pen or a notepad during lessons. She didn't react to our various teachers either, who welcomed her warmly at the start of their lessons.

When the school bell rang after fifth period, Anna Lachs stood up, slung the squeaky-green bag over her shoulder and left the classroom without a word of farewell.

Dr. Kurz, who had taught us maths, looked after her in bewilderment and murmured: "Actually, I'm the one who ends the lesson."

And Marius turned to me, shook his head and said sympathetically: "Well, Stubby, you've landed yourself a real weirdo as a neighbour. That funny little dumpling has got more than one screw loose!"

After school I went home with Robi. Robi has three little brothers and a housewife mum who cooks fantastic lunches and is happy when Robi brings me along. Because I always praise her food, which her own four children never do. She'd certainly have nothing against it if I came for lunch every day after school, but my father thinks that would be too pushy. So I only eat at Robi's on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the days when we get maths homework.

In a way, I earn my lunches by helping Robi with his maths homework and correcting his mistakes. But I don't seem to have much talent as a tutor, because next time Robi makes the same mistakes again. Probably that's because I don't understand why someone doesn't understand something that's perfectly obvious. I don't have the gift of thinking my way into an untalented brain.

I stayed at Robi's until five o'clock. I didn't want to turn up at home until Mrs. Zierhut had buzzed off. Mrs. Zierhut is our cleaning lady. She comes every day, is always in a bad mood and grumbles loudly to herself because my father and I have supposedly turned the beautiful order she's made back into a muddle overnight. When I'm at home while she's still bustling about, she comes into my room every few minutes without knocking and gets worked up about something. She accuses me of constantly tramping across the white living-room carpet in muddy shoes, of always putting dishes into the dishwasher too dirty, of having once again not screwed the cap back on the toothpaste, and of doing everything in my power to make her life even harder than it already is. And before she leaves, she is guaranteed to say: "This house finally needs a woman again, so this bachelor mess comes to an end!"

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The thing is, my parents got divorced five years ago. Since our house already belonged to my father before the wedding, my mother moved out and bought herself a flat in the middle of town. For a year after that I shuttled back and forth: one week at my father's, one week at my mother's. Somehow that was pretty annoying for me. Mostly because my mother didn't have regular working hours. She's a photographer and back then was employed by a women's magazine. She often had to work evenings and weekends and would book a babysitter for me or take me to my grandmother's. And when the babysitter had no time or my grandmother had a migraine, I ended up at my father's anyway, despite it being Mum's week.

Then my mother got the chance to work in New York for half a year, and of course for that half year I was only at my father's. When my mother came back from New York, I told her I was fed up with the constant back and forth and wanted to live with my father full-time. It's simply much more convenient for me. It takes me just seven minutes to get to school, all my friends live nearby, my father never has to fly off somewhere unexpectedly, and our big garden with its swimming pool and hammock is nothing to sneeze at in summer either.

Besides, I just like to spread out. At my mother's flat I have only a tiny little room, whereas in our house I have my own bathroom and three big rooms. One for my pool table, my pinball machine and my model railway, one is my bedroom, video and TV room, and the third is my study with a desk, bookshelves and a computer.

My mother was a little sad that I'd decided to live with my father. But my decision made her life enormously easier too. She could spend weeks photographing abroad and no longer had to turn down any super assignments because of me. That's how she really made it big as a photographer. I suspect she even earns more than my father now, although he earns much more than most of my friends' fathers. In any case, my mother spends far more money, never whines that something is too expensive, and buys me clothes in shops that my father says only stinking-rich snobs walk into.

Now I see my mother once or twice a month, and we always have lots of fun together. Sometimes, at weekends, I sleep over at her place too. And the key to her flat still hangs on my key ring. But I only really feel at home in our house.

My father didn't get home until I was already in bed, watching an hour of bedtime TV. He stomped up to me and told me, yawning, that he'd unfortunately, unfortunately had to work overtime again.

Polite as I am, I muted the TV, even though it had just gotten exciting, and told my father there was a pot of veal goulash in the fridge. Mrs. Zierhut had put it in there. Strictly speaking, it's only part of her duties to cook my lunch, but most of the time she also prepares our dinner.

My father said he had already eaten at the office. A kebab from the Turkish place across from the firm, which had now given him a stomach ache and heartburn.

Then he asked: "So, how do you like my colleague's daughter, son of mine?"

"About as much as a boil on my backside," I answered, and told him how this strange person had behaved.

My father murmured with a sigh: "Poor child!"

That didn't surprise me. He's a world champion at feeling sympathy. Beggars get a ten-euro note from him; when he sees a report about street children on TV, his dinner stops tasting good; he even feels sorry for Mrs. Zierhut. "Anyone who's that grumpy and sour-faced," he says, "deserves our pity."

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So it didn't surprise me either that, before going downstairs, he added: "Son of mine, with some people you need to have a lot of patience. It takes them a while to start behaving as nicely as they really are."

"Amen," I muttered once the door had closed, and turned the TV sound back on. Too late! The exciting scene was long over.

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Christine Nöstlinger was born in Vienna on 13 October 1936 and grew up there in a working-class suburb. She studied commercial art before turning to writing. In 1970, she published her first children's book, which turned out to be an immediate success. Since then, she has brought out over one hundred picture, children's and young people's books, many of which have been translated into other languages and received major awards. Christine Nöstlinger, who works for press, radio and television as well as being an author of children's and young people's books, holds the Hans Christian Andersen Medal awarded by the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), for her complete works. For these, she also received the generous Astrid Lindgren Memorial Prize in 2003, when it was awarded for the first time. Christine Nöstlinger died on June 28, 2018 in Vienna.

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