

THE ORPHAN BAND of SPRINGDALE

ANNE NESBET



It's 1941, and tensions are rising in the United States as the Second World War rages in Europe. Eleven-year-old Gusta's life, like the world around her, is about to change. Her father, a foreign-born labor organizer, has had to flee the country, and Gusta has been sent to live in an orphanage run by her grandmother. Nearsighted, snaggletoothed Gusta arrives in Springdale, Maine, lugging her one precious possession: a beloved old French horn, her sole memento of her father. But in a family that's long on troubles and short on money, how can a girl hang on to something so valuable and yet so useless when Gusta's mill-worker uncle needs surgery to fix his mangled hand, with no union to help him pay? Inspired by her mother's fanciful stories, Gusta secretly hopes to find the coin-like "Wish" that her sea-captain great-grandfather supposedly left hidden somewhere. Meanwhile, even as Gusta gets to know the rambunctious orphans at the home, she feels like an outsider at her new school—and finds herself facing patriotism turned to prejudice, alien registration drives, and a family secret likely to turn the small town upside down.

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A Note from Author Anne Nesbet



“Oh, this reminds me of Maine!”

— my mother, in front of any beautiful landscape anywhere

There are stories that come from the heart and others that come also from the very bones that give us shape. *The Orphan Band of Springdale* is one of those bone-marrow tales. It is my echo of a story that I wish my mother had been able to finish telling me—the story of her childhood, which was so hardscrabble and tough that she could only bear to give us scraps and pieces of it when we were little.

We knew that she had to go to a new school in a new town every year, because her family could never afford to pay the rent and so had to move constantly.

We knew that her father was mostly not around.

We knew that during particularly hard times she would be sent to live in the orphan home run by her grandmother up in Maine—an orphan home that had been started in order to keep a family secret.

And we knew that somehow, out of all this trouble, our mother emerged with some enduring and fine things: how to tell a good story, how to bring extended family together around a table, and how to play the French horn. When summer came, she would take us back to the farming country of southern Maine, and we camped on a hill that had been allowed to go back to woods, from the top of which all the grown-ups insisted that “with a good telescope” you might be able to see sails off the Portland coast, maybe.

This was not the Maine of fishermen and saltwater. Instead of the ocean, we had occasional treks to Square Pond. The mosquitoes kept us on our toes.

The cousins would gather at the end of the day, and over long afternoons my mother and grandmother and aunts and uncles and cousins would share epic stories in few words while we kids ran around creating small kingdoms in the woods.

I would have eavesdropped better if I had known I would lose my mother early. But of course, I didn’t know.

But it happened: my mother died too young, and years passed, and all the stories about Maine kept wriggling and whispering inside me, and eventually I realized I was going to have to give some voice to them. I couldn’t ever know the whole truth about my mother’s childhood, true—but that just meant I would have to write it anyway, as fiction.

To make that fiction as true as possible, I went back to Maine and spent some time at the Sanford-Springvale Historical Society, reading through old issues of the excellent local paper, the *Sanford Tribune*. The flavor of 1941 comes through those newspaper pages: anxieties about drought and the war in Europe, alien registration drives, union elections in the local mills, a “7-Point Health Certificate” school campaign waged with vigor against bad eyes, crooked teeth, and malnutrition, all garnished with competing hyperbolic ads from the local dairies.

So the seeds of this story are true, but the resulting crop is fiction. I changed the identities and biographies of my characters and even tweaked the names of the local towns, out of respect for the difference between Gusta’s fictional world and the real childhood places of my real mother.

My mother did love a good story, and I hope she would have been tickled by this one. In the heart-and-marrow of my dreams, sometimes she even looks up from the pages and smiles her wonderful, crooked grin and says, “Oh, Anne, this reminds me of Maine!”