**Number The Stars**
**by Lois Lowry**
Reader’s Theater Script by Beth Bugner & Donna Wojcik

**Characters:** Narrator, Annemarie, Uncle Henrik, Mama, Ellen, Officer, Peter, Young Mother, Elderly Man, Mr. Rosen

**Background:**In 1943 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the lives of ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen and her best friend Ellen Rosen are filled with school, food shortages, and Nazi soldiers marching in their town. The Jews of Denmark are being “relocated” and Annemarie’s family help to save their Jewish friends by smuggling them across the sea to Sweden.

**Narrator:** Annemarie went outside alone after supper. Through the kitchen window she could hear Mama and Ellen talking as they did the dishes. She knew Kirsti was playing on the floor with dolls that had once belonged to Mama. She wandered to the barn, where Uncle Henrik was milking Blossom. Annemarie leaned against the ancient splintery wood of the barn wall and listened to the sharp rattling sound of the streams of milk as they hit the sides of the bucket. Uncle Henrik looked over and smiled.

**Annemarie:** Uncle Henrik, you are lying to me, you and Mama both!

**Uncle Henrik:** (Thoughtfully) You are angry.

**Annemarie:** Yes! Mama has never lied to me before. Never. But I know there is no Great-aunt Birte. Never once in all the stories I’ve heard, all the pictures I’ve seen, has there been a Great-aunt Birte.

**Uncle Henrik:** (sighs and looks at cow) Almost done? ( addressing Annemarie)How brave are you, little Annemarie?

**Annemarie:** Not very (as she looked down to the floor)

**Uncle Henrik:** I think that is not true, I think you are like your mama, and you are like your papa, and like me. Frightened, but determined, and if the time came to be brave, I am sure you would be very, very brave! But, it is much easier to be brave if you don’t know everything. Your mama does not know everything, we only know what we need to know. Do you understand what I am saying?

**Narrator:** Annemarie wasn’t sure. She pondered on what bravery meant. She had been very frightened the day – not long ago, though now it seemed far in the past – when the soldier had stopped her on the street and asked questions in his rough voice. She had not known everything then. She had not known that the Germans were going to take away all the Jews. And so, when the soldier asked, looking at Ellen that day, “What’s your friend’s name?” she had been able to answer him, even though she was frightened. If she had known everything, it would not have been so easy to be brave.
**Annemarie:** Yes, I think I understand.
**Uncle Henrik:** You guessed correctly, there is no Great-aunt Birte and never has been. Your mama lied to you and so did I. We did so to help you be brave, because we love you. Will you forgive us for that?

**Annemarie:** I will. (she nodded)

**Uncle Henrik:** And I am not going to tell you anymore, not now, for the same reason….Do you understand?

**Annemarie:** (Nodding)Yes, I do

**Narrator:** Suddenly there was noise outside the barn, Uncle Henrick became nervous, he rose quickly went to the window of the barn, stood in the shadows and looked out the windows.

**Uncle Henrik:** It is the hearse. (smiling) It is Great-aunt Birte who never was. So my little friend, it is time for the night of mourning to begin. Are you ready?

**Narrator:** Annemarie took her uncle’s hand and he led her out of the barn. The gleaning wood casket rested on supports in the center of the living room and was surrounded by the fragile, papery flowers that Annemarie and Ellen had picked that afternoon. Lighted candles stood in holders on the table and cast a soft flickering light. The hearse had gone, and the solemn-faced men who had carried the casket indoors had gone with it, after speaking quietly to Uncle Henrik. Kirsti had reluctantly been sent to bed at this point.

**Ellen:** (Addressing Mama and looking very sad) I am so sorry your Great-aunt Birtie died.

**Mama:** Thank you, Ellen

**Narrator:** Annemarie thought to herself that she was now lying too and to her very best friend. She wanted to tell Ellen the truth but knew it was not the right thing to do. She understood that she was protecting Ellen the way her mother had protected her. Although she did not know why the casket was there or who was in it…she knew it was safer for Ellen to believe it was Aunt Birte, so she said nothing. As the night went on, friends and neighbors came into pay their respects to the family. Annemarie stood at the entrance to the room watching the others mourn the loss of Great –aunt Birte. She thought back to when Lise died and Mama’s friends brought food each day so she would not have to cook. The silence had Annemarie thinking, these people had nothing to talk about because there was no Great-aunt Birtie, they had nothing to say.

**Uncle Henrik:** It is getting late, I should get the boat... (blows out the candles, so there is no light at all)Good here they come. Ellen, come with me.
Ellen looks questioningly towards Mama

**Mama:** (Nods to Ellen) Go with Henrik

**Narrator:** Annemarie watched as Ellen went with Henrik. She could hear a sharp, low cry from Ellen, and the sounds of voices speaking softly. In a moment Uncle Henrik returned with Peter Neilsen behind him. Peter hugged Mama, then Annemarie. He said nothing, he then went to the living room. Shortly after Ellen returned, she was held tightly, like a little girl, against her father’s chest. Her mother was beside them.

**Uncle Henrik:** You are all here now, I must go. (Uncle Henrik prepares to go)

**Elderly Man:** May God keep you safe.

**Uncle Henrik:** God keep us all safe.

**Mama:** Annemarie, you may go to bed now if you’d like, it is getting late.

**Annemarie:** No, not yet (yawning)

**Narrator:** Everyone sat around quietly, tired. Suddenly headlights swept through the sheer curtains as a car pulled up outside. The car doors slammed. Everyone in the room was tense but no one spoke. There was a thunderous pounding on the door. Mama went to answer it. Then the heavy, frightening familiar staccato boots on the kitchen floor. The woman with the baby gasped and began to weep.

**Officer:** We have observed a large number of people gathered at this house tonight, what is the explanation?

**Mama:** There has been a death, it is our tradition to gather and pay respects when a family member dies. I am sure you are familiar with our customs.

**Narrator:** The officer pushed Mama ahead of him and entered the living room. He looked at each of them and finally, the casket.

**Officer:** Who died?

**Narrator:** No one answered, Annemarie realized he was asking her.

**Annemarie:** My Great-aunt Birte

**Officer:** (Mockingly) Poor Great-aunt Birte. (Places his hand on the casket) I do know your customs. And it is to pay one’s respects by looking your loved one in the face. It seems odd to me that you have closed this coffin up so tightly. WHY IS IT NOT OPEN? (yelling) Let us open it and take one last look at Great-aunt Birte!

**Mama:** You’re right. The Doctor said it should be closed because she died of Typhus and the germs might still be there, would still be dangerous. But what does he know-only a country doctor, and an old man at that! Surely Typhus germs would not linger in a dead person! And Dear Aunt-Birtie, I have been longing to see her face. Of course we will open the casket! I am glad you suggested-

**Officer:** (slaps Mama in the face) You foolish woman, to think we had any interest in seeing the body of your deceased aunt, open it after I leave! (Headed for the door) Put all these candles out, or pull the curtains!

**Narrator:** As the officer left and drove away, Annemarie understood at that moment why not knowing everything really can make you more brave that if you knew the truth.

**Peter:** (Reaching for the Bible, opens it quickly) I will read a Psalm. O praise the Lord! How good is it to sing Psalms of our God. How Pleasant to praise him! The lord is rebuilding Jerusalem; he gathers in the scattered sons of Israel. It is he who heals the broken in spirit and binds up their wounds, he who numbers the stars, one by one.

**Narrator:** Mama sat down and listened. Gradually each of them began to relax. Annemarie could see the old man across the room, moving his lips as Peter read; he knew the ancient psalm by heart. Annemarie tried to listen, but she felt the cold, dark world around her. Peter closed the Bible and let out a sigh.

**Peter:** Now, it is time.

**Narrator:** Peter lifted the lid to the casket. There was no one in the casket at all. Instead it seemed to be stuffed with folded blankets and articles of clothing. Peter began distributing the coffin’s contents.

**Peter:** It will be very cold. Put them on. I am sorry. There is nothing for a baby.

**Mama:** I’ll find something. The baby must be warm. (returns in a few moments with Kirsti’s thick red sweater) Here, it will be much too big, but that will make it even warmer for him.

**Young Mother:** Her. She’s a girl. Her name is Rachel.

**Peter:** How much does she weigh?

**Young Mother:** She was seven pounds when she was born. She’s gained a little, but not very much. Maybe she weighs eight pounds now, no more.

**Peter:** (holding a vial of medicine)A few drops will be enough, then. It has no taste. She won’t even notice.

**Young Mother:** Please, no. She always sleeps all night. Please, she doesn’t need it, I promise. She won’t cry.

**Peter:** (his voice is firm) We can’t take a chance. (Administers a few drops of the medicine into the baby’s mouth. Then hands blankets to everyone.) Carry these with you. You will need them later.

**Mama:** Here is a small package of food for each of you. Just some cheese, bread, and apples.

**Peter:** (pulling Mr. Rosen aside) Mr. Rosen, I must get this to Henrik. But I might not see him. I am going to take the others only to the harbor and they will go to the boat alone. I want you to deliver this. Without fail. It is of great importance.

**Mr. Rosen:** Yes Peter. It will be safe with me.

**Peter:** (Addressing the group) Now, I will lead the first group. You, and you, and you. (he gestured to the elderly man and the young couple with the baby.) Inge, you wait twenty minutes and then bring the Rosens. Don’t come sooner. We must be separate on the path so there is no chance of being seen. Come directly back to the house after you have seen the Rosens safely to Henrik. Stay in the shadows and on the back path- you know that, of course. By the time you get the Rosens to the boat, I will be gone. As soon as I deliver my group, I must move on. There is work to be done tonight. So I will say goodbye to you now.

**Annemarie:** (hugging Peter) But we will see you again soon?

**Peter:** I hope so. Very soon. Don’t grow much more, or you will be taller than I am, little Longlegs! (Kisses Mama on the cheek) Good bye Inge. (Shakes Mr. Rosen’s hand) Godspeed, Sir.

**Narrator:** Annemarie realized that she had really not been told that Uncle Henrik was taking them, in his boat, across the sea, to Sweden. She knew how frightened Mrs. Rosen was of the sea; its width, its depth, its cold. She knew how frightened Ellen was of the soldiers, with their guns and boots, who were certainly looking for them. And she knew how frightened they all must be of the future. But their shoulders were as straight as they had been in the past: in the classroom, on the stage, at the Sabbath table. So there were other sources, too, of pride and they had not left everything behind.