

ACT ONE

SCENE 1 – THE EDITOR

(Music up: **CHRISTMAS BUS THEME.**

Music segues to the sound of a blustery wind.

The EDITOR bustles in, bundled in overcoat and scarf, shivering with cold. He pauses for a moment, catching his breath, then turns to the audience. As he speaks, he sheds his coat, scarf and hat and hangs them on a coat rack.)

THE EDITOR. Whooooeee. She's blowing like a politician out there, and looking a lot like snow. But then, it always looks like snow right before Christmas. It's a tradition around here. Dark clouds, temperature dropping, wind picking up, kids getting that sparkle in their eyes and that rosy glow in their cheeks. Everybody gets excited—buying up all the milk and bread, waxing the runners on the sled, putting out extra seed for the birds. But then...nothing! Not a single dad-burned flake. That's the way it's always been. Except for once. And that's what I'm gonna tell you about. (*He pulls a reporter's notebook from a pocket and flips pages.*) Matter of fact, I'm writing it up for the newspaper. It's something my grandfather started years ago when he founded the pa-

per—a special Christmas edition with recipes, poetry, a whole page of letters to Santa, and an inspirational story. I've been saving this one and I think it's pretty special. But...I'll let you judge.

(Music up: INTERLUDE 1.)

SCENE 2 – THE ORPHANAGE

(Lights up on the main room—cluttered, messy and well-lived-in, sparsely populated with worn but sturdy furniture. Through a window we see green fields and blue skies. Throughout the play, the EDITOR moves freely and unseen among the other members of the cast.)

THE EDITOR. Let me take you back a few years to Peaceful Valley...a green and pleasant place, with orchards and pastures and farmland, vegetable gardens and sturdy barns. But Peaceful Valley was not a peaceful place—*(Abrupt musical crash.)* And the reason was the Peaceful Valley Orphanage.

(Music up: IT'S A MADHOUSE!)

A sudden burst of noise and motion as the orphans—THOMAS, CLARA, EUGENE, HILDA, DONALD, JENNY and LOUANN—dash into the room, followed by FRUMP, staying just out of her reach. EUGENE has a rubber snake in his hand. The others are either chasing him or trying to stay out of his way. They romp about, laughing and yelling.)

THE BUSYBODIES (*singing*).

BUSY, BUSY, BUSY, BUSY, BUSY.

**WE'RE THE BUSYBODIES AND WE'VE COME TO
TAKE A LOOK**

**AT EVERY LITTLE CRANNY AND EVERY LITTLE
NOOK;**

WE'LL MAKE A NOTE OF EVERYTHING,

ETHEL.

I'LL WRITE IT IN MY BOOK.

HORTENSE.

**AND THE FIRST THING WE NOTICE...IT'S A
MADHOUSE!**

MYRTLE.

IT'S A MADHOUSE!

ETHEL.

IT'S A MADHOUSE!

THE BUSYBODIES.

IT'S A MADHOUSE!

(Music under as the BUSYBODIES stride briskly about the room, poking and prying. ETHEL scribbles furiously in her notepad. FRUMP follows them in a dither, trying ineffectually to bring order to the clutter.)

HORTENSE. Aaaggh! Dust! Have you ever seen such?

Ethel, are you writing this down?

ETHEL. Every little detail, Hortense.

MYRTLE. Aaaggh! Cobwebs! I don't believe the place has had a proper cleaning in years!

HORTENSE. Decades, Myrtle, if you ask me.

ETHEL. Somewhere between years and decades.

FRUMP. Well, you know cleaning day is Saturday, and since it's Friday...

ETHEL. Aaaggh! Cooties!

HORTENSE. Add it to the list, Ethel.

ETHEL. You betcha!

HORTENSE. I've never seen such disorganization!

MYRTLE. Slothfulness!

ETHEL. How do you spell that?

MYRTLE. S-l-o-t-h...

HORTENSE. Untidiness!

THE BUSYBODIES. Chaos and confusion!

(The KIDS gallop in—laughing, yelling, milling about the BUSYBODIES—who huddle in a tight circle, holding up their skirts, looking on in horror as they edge toward the door.)

THE BUSYBODIES *(cont'd)*.

IT'S A MADHOUSE!

THOMAS & KIDS.

IT'S A MADHOUSE!

FRUMP.

IT'S A MADHOUSE!

ALL.

IT'S A MAD...HOUSE!

other kids were kind and understanding. The unwritten rule at the orphanage—you just accepted everybody as they were, geraniums and all.

(A loud knock at the door. Music out.)

THE EDITOR *(cont'd)*. And then...there was Frankie.

(FRUMP crosses to the door and opens it to reveal SHERIFF SNODGRASS, holding FRANKIE by the collar. FRUMP pretends not to notice FRANKIE.)

FRUMP. Why, Sheriff Snodgrass, how lovely of you to drop by! Come on in the kitchen. I've got some fresh apple cobbler.

(SHERIFF SNODGRASS enters and follows her, with FRANKIE in his grip.)

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Miz Frump, I'm afraid I don't have time for apple cobbler. I'm here on business. Serious business.

FRUMP. Oh, dear.

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Old Man Gulley has been complaining about his cows' milk turning sour. I have investigated, Miz Frump, and I have found the culprit.

FRUMP. They've been eating bitterweed?

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. No, Miz Frump, this culprit.
(Gives FRANKIE a shake.) I caught young Frankie here riding those cows.

FRUMP. Oh, dear. Frankie, is that so? *(FRANKIE shrugs.)*

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. At a gallop, Miz Frump. Cows ain't meant to be ridden, especially at a gallop. *(With a jerk, FRANKIE breaks free from the SHERIFF's grasp. The SHERIFF and FRUMP chase him about the room.)* Frankie, you come back here! You little rascal!

FRUMP. Frankie, stop that right now! Frankie...! *(FRANKIE eludes their grasp and exits in a dash, laughing gleefully.)*

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Miz Frump, that boy...that boy...

FRUMP. He's an energetic and ingenious young man, Sheriff. Why, Frankie was telling me the other day that he aspires to be a law enforcement officer, just like yourself. A champion of truth and justice.

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Miz Frump, you can't be a law enforcement officer if you have a criminal record. And I'd say that's where that energetic and ingenious young man is headed.

FRUMP. Now, Sheriff, it can't be as grim as all that.

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. And he's not the only one. I'm out here constantly—neighbors calling about your young'uns chasing each other up and down the road with garden implements, putting bedsheets on their heads and scaring poor old widow ladies... You have a problem with discipline, Miz Frump.

FRUMP. Sheriff, these are fine young people. We've just got to find ways to channel their boundless energy into constructive avenues. We've got to emphasize socialization, fraternalization and matriculation.

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Huh?

**YOU'RE THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN
OUR FAMILY;
THERE IS ONE THING ON WHICH WE CAN ALL
AGREE,
WE LOVE YA FRUMP, WE LOVE YA FRUMP.**

(The KIDS all gather around FRUMP and give her a hug, rummaging in her pockets for jellybeans, then all but THOMAS exit noisily.)

FRUMP. My, my...they are such a bunch of little dears.
THOMAS. If you say so, Frump.

(FRUMP begins to tidy the room. THOMAS sits and starts drawing on a tablet.

Music under: INTERLUDE 3.)

THE EDITOR. Now, Thomas, he'd been at the orphanage almost as long as Frump. She found him one morning on the doorstep—a little baby, wrapped in a blanket, in an apple crate. Over the years, most of the kids who came here stayed for a while and then went on to good, permanent homes. But for some reason, nobody took Thomas. So he grew up right there at the orphanage. He was Frump's right-hand man.

(Music out. FRUMP looks over THOMAS's shoulder.)

FRUMP. What's that you're working on?
THOMAS *(showing her the drawing)*. A kid-o-mometer.
FRUMP. A what?

THOMAS. See, you put a dirty, hungry kid in this end about five o'clock in the afternoon, press a button, and he comes out the other end at six...clean, fed, and with his teeth brushed.

FRUMP. Goodness gracious, Thomas. What will you think of next? (*Examines the drawing.*) One of these days, I'll be telling the children, "If you study hard, you'll be a big success like our illustrious Thomas—doctor of mechanical engineering, winner of the Nobel Prize for Thing-A-Ma-Jigs."

THOMAS. You'll be my special guest at the award ceremony.

FRUMP. We'll all be there.

THOMAS (*taking the drawing back*). But that means I've got to go to college.

FRUMP. Of course.

THOMAS. Aw, Frump, there's no money for college. I'll graduate and get a job at Dub's Garage and spend my life rebuilding carburetors and replacing brake pads.

(*Music up: PERSISTENCE.*)

FRUMP. Nonsense! We'll find a way. I've got faith in you, and you've got to have faith in yourself. Faith...and persistence! Like Lewis and Clark.

(*Singing.*)

LEWIS AND CLARK SET OUT ONE DAY
TO FIND THE OTHER END OF THE USA;
THEY HAD INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE
PRESIDENT;
THEY HIRED SOME ROUGH AND READY GUYS,
MADE A PLAN AND BOUGHT SUPPLIES,

**OVERCOME RESISTANCE,
BECAUSE SUCCESS IS NINETY-NINE PERCENT
PERSISTENCE.
OH YEAH, SUCCESS IS NINETY-NINE PERCENT
PERSISTENCE.**

(Lights down on FRUMP and THOMAS, up on the EDITOR.)

Music under: INTERLUDE 4.)

THE EDITOR. So...that was the Peaceful Valley Orphanage. The kids were full of spirit and mischief. But Frump was a good, soft-hearted woman. She'd seen a lot of 'em come and go. They'd arrive feeling frightened and lonely, but Frump would give 'em a place where they felt safe, and love 'em even when they aggravated the dickens out of her. She just couldn't imagine doing anything else. Unfortunately, there were some other folks who could.

(Music out.)

SCENE 3 – A MEETING

(The BUSYBODIES—HORTENSE, MYRTLE and ETHEL—and SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Chairs for all.)

HORTENSE. The meeting of the board of trustees will come to order. All in favor of requesting Mrs. Frump's resignation, say aye.

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Now, wait just a minute, Hortense. Shouldn't we have some discussion before we take such a drastic step?

HORTENSE. Discussion, you want discussion? All right, we'll discuss.

MYRTLE. As if there were anything to discuss...

ETHEL. Anything at all...

HORTENSE. Sheriff Snodgrass, how many times a week are you called to Peaceful Valley because of some ruckus involving those wild hooligans?

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Well, that would be hard to say...

HORTENSE. Several?

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Well...

MYRTLE. More than several, I'd wager...

ETHEL. Many more than several.

HORTENSE. When you could be attending to more serious law enforcement matters, you're out there trying to bring some order to chaos.

MYRTLE. No telling what kind of criminal element is running loose...

ETHEL. ...while you're busy chasing hooligans.

SHERIFF SNODGRASS. Now, ladies, you're making things seem worse than they are.

HORTENSE. Worse than they are? Well, Sheriff, we've been investigating and we've compiled a report. Ethel...

(ETHEL unrolls a long scroll of paper.)

ETHEL *(reading)*. Causing uproar at school...running in the halls, chewing gum in class, letting loose garden snakes and toadfrogs in the teachers' lounge...

is in the open doorway. Lights are dim on the porch, up on THE EDITOR.

Music under: INTERLUDE 5.)

THE EDITOR. Now, there's also another part to this story. It took place about the same time, and not far away. Over on Knob Hill, there was a musician, a fellow who called himself the Traveling Troubadour. He had won a local talent contest, and now, he was determined to seek notoriety in the wider world. The only problem was his girlfriend, the lovely Darlene.

(Light down on the EDITOR, up on the TROUBADOUR and DARLENE—who stands there with her arms crossed and a thoroughly peeved look. Music out.)

THE TROUBADOUR. Aw, honey-bunch, don't be like that.

DARLENE. If I was really your honey-bunch, you wouldn't be going off on a wild toot.

THE TROUBADOUR. It's not a wild toot. I've got music in my soul and rhythm in my fingers. I'm writing all these songs, and I think they're pretty good.

DARLENE. Then sit on the porch and pick and sing and write to your heart's content. Sing your songs to me. Sing 'em to Mama and Daddy. They like to have a little music while they're shelling butterbeans.

THE TROUBADOUR. I've gotta see if anybody else thinks they're good. And the only place I can do that is out on the road.

DARLENE. Yeah, I've heard what happens out on the road with you show-business types. If you're rotten, nobody'll give you the time of day. If you're good, you'll have women falling all over you.

THE TROUBADOUR. I'm not interested in any woman but you, honey-bunch.

DARLENE. Then stay here and prove it. I want a man who's reliable. A man who'll settle down and get a steady job and raise a good family. Papa says they're hiring at the sawmill. You can start tomorrow.

(The TROUBADOUR agonizes for a moment.)

THE TROUBADOUR. I gotta try this. Just for a few months. If it doesn't work out, I'll come home and go to work at the sawmill. I've got the rest of my life to settle down. I love you, Darlene. Promise you'll wait for me.

DARLENE. I love you too. But I've got other prospects, and I'm not making any promises.

(DARLENE exits, slamming the door behind her. The TROUBADOUR stands there dejectedly for a moment, then picks up his suitcase and squares his shoulders.)

THE TROUBADOUR. Working at the sawmill...can you believe that? Why, I'd cut off all my fingers, and then what? Mama and Daddy could shell butterbeans in dead silence!

(Lights down on the porch. Special up on the TROUBADOUR as he moves several steps away and calls back to the house...)

SCENE 5 – THE ORPHANAGE

(The main room—rumpled and empty. Through the window we see gray skies and bare-limbed trees. Lights dim on the room, up on the EDITOR.

Music under: CHRISTMAS AT THE ORPHANAGE.)

THE EDITOR. And now, let me tell you about Christmas...which is, after all, what our story is about. Christmas was Frump's favorite time of the year. She thought part of the fun of Christmas was getting herself all in a dither. And then, getting everybody else in a dither.

(Light down on the EDITOR, up on the room. FRUMP rushes in, hands a'flutter, looking wildly about.)

FRUMP. Oh dear, oh dear! Where on earth could they be?

(She starts frantically searching the room. THOMAS enters.)

THOMAS. Frump...what's the matter?

FRUMP. I can't find them.

THOMAS. Find what?

FRUMP. My reading glasses.

THOMAS *(calling offstage)*. Hey, guys! Need some help in here!

(The KIDS enter.)

THOMAS *(cont'd)*. Frump's lost her reading glasses.

THE KIDS. Again?!

FRUMP. I can't read the recipes without my glasses. The cookies, the candy, the cakes, the pies, the gingerbread for the gingerbread house...oh dear, oh dear!

(FRUMP, THOMAS and the KIDS dash about the room for a moment, looking in every nook and cranny. DONALD follows FRUMP, trying to get her attention. Finally...)

DONALD *(shouting)*. I found 'em!

(Everybody stops and stares at DONALD.)

THOMAS & KIDS. Where?

DONALD *(grinning)*. On Frump's head.

CLARA. Omigosh, Frump's in a dither.

EUGENE. And that could only mean one thing.

ALL. It's Christmas!

FRUMP. So much to do and so little time to do it!

THOMAS & KIDS. Then let's get busy!

FRUMP & KIDS *(singing)*.

**LET'S SEND THOMAS TO THE WOODS,
GET A TREE AND MAKE IT GOOD;
DECORATE IT LIKE WE SHOULD;
CHRISTMAS AT THE ORPHANAGE!**

(Music under. THOMAS points dramatically and then exits in a rush.)

ALL.

CHRISTMAS AT THE ORPHANAGE!

(Music under as the KIDS continue to display presents.)

EUGENE. Hey, guys, I got a pogo stick.

FRUMP. To be used outside, Eugene. And carefully. We want no more broken bones.

HILDA. An album of love songs. Oooohhhh!

JENNY. Watercolors!

FRUMP. You'll be a famous artist someday, Jenny.

LOUANN. Mittens! Gee, Frump, I can never seem to keep my hands warm.

FRUMP. Knitted them myself, dear.

FRANKIE *(blowing on his bugle)*. Wait'll Old Man Gulley's cows hear this.

FRUMP. Don't you dare, young man!

THOMAS *(singing as he holds up a pair of gaudy socks)*.

GEE, I GOT A PAIR OF SOCKS,

EUGENE.

THEY LOOK LIKE THEY'VE GOT CHICKEN POX.

THE KIDS.

AT LEAST IT'S NOT A BOX OF ROCKS.

ALL.

CHRISTMAS AT THE ORPHANAGE!

THOMAS. This is the best Christmas ever, Frump!

THE KIDS. Yeahhhhh!