

rates or trapping smugglers. Best of all, whenever Annie got into a really tight spot, this friend of hers named Punjab would show up and cut the bad guys' heads off. What a great friend to have!

THE OLD MAN. Sorry, nothing today from "Little Orphan Annie."

*(RALPHIE goes through the discarded mail.)*

RALPH. At the end of each broadcast the announcer called out a string of numbers. Kids all over the country translated those numbers into the secret message, getting the *real truth* straight from Orphan Annie. Every day without a decoder pin postponed my spiritual and intellectual growth.

MOTHER. Come eat your oatmeal.

*(RALPHIE moves toward his chair.)*

RALPH. To a kid, the time it takes to get something you've sent for in the mail is longer than the time it would take to build the Pyramids single-handed using the number three Erector set. *(Pause.)* The one without the motor.

*(RALPHIE sits next to RANDY who has congealed globs of oatmeal on his face, in his hair, and distributed over the table top, islands of goo in a sea of spilled milk. His spoon sticks straight up in the oatmeal bowl.)*

MOTHER. Oh, Randy, don't play with your food, eat it!

*(RANDY begins to pout, cry and whimper.)*

RALPH. Most mornings my kid brother wore more oatmeal than he ate.

THE OLD MAN. Stop that noise! Eat that food or I'll give you somethin' to cry about!

RALPH. My mother was more subtle.

MOTHER. Randy, how does the little piggy go?

RANDY (*suddenly full of life, grunts twice*). Snort! Snort!

MOTHER. That's right! That's right! *How does the little piggy go? (RANDY grunts again. MOTHER laughs and claps her hands. She turns back to the countertop, picks up another bowl and conceals it behind her back, moving toward RANDY.)* How does the little piggy go? (*RANDY grunts again. MOTHER laughs and, in one smooth balletic movement, replaces his oatmeal bowl with a new one.*) Now show me how the piggies eat! Here's a new trough! Go on, show me!

RANDY. Snort! (*He buries his nose in the fresh bowl and makes pig noises.*)

MOTHER. Mommy's little piggy! Good piggy! Eat it all up!

THE OLD MAN (*sorting through mail*). ... bill, bill, neckties by mail ... bill ... Ha! Look at this! (*Turns the envelope over, opens it.*)

MOTHER. What is it?

THE OLD MAN. Another contest! Fifty Thousand Dollar Giant Jackpot Puzzle! (*He sits at the table, takes a pencil from his pocket and begins writing.*)

RALPH. The Old Man was hooked on contests. He entered them all. Match the Baby Pictures. Find the Hidden Objects. And sports? The Old Man knew sports.

THE OLD MAN. "What National League team won the World Series in 1907?" Easy. Chicago Cubs. (*He writes.*)

RALPH. The Old Man never lost hope. He believed that awards would come to him who was faithful, persevering and mailed by deadline.

THE OLD MAN. "What's the name of the Lone Ranger's nephew's horse?" The Lone Ranger's *nephew*? His *horse*? Who could ...

MOTHER. Victor. His name is Victor

THE OLD MAN (*surprised*). How'd you know that?

MOTHER. Everybody knows that.

(*THE OLD MAN turns to look quizzically at RANDY, who nods solemnly.*)

THE OLD MAN (*mocking under his breath*). Oh! Everybody knows that!

MOTHER. Victor belongs to Dan Reid, the Lone Ranger's nephew. You see, when the Texas Rangers rode into Bryant's Gap, they ...

THE OLD MAN. Never mind. (*He buries his nose in the contest form.*)

(*Blue smoke seeps out of a vent in the wall and around the basement door as MOTHER circles the table.*)

THE OLD MAN (*cont'd, reading*). "Where there's blank there's fire." (*Looks up, considering.*) "Where there's ... blank ... there's fire." (*Grunts.*) "Where there's ... "

MOTHER (*now she sees it*). Smoke!

THE OLD MAN (*pleased*). Smoke! (*He writes it in.*)

MOTHER (*pointing*). Smoke! Smoke!

THE OLD MAN. I heard you. Where there's ... (*He sees the smoke.*) Smoke! Ha! It's a clinker! (*He jumps up, grabs a furnace poker from a hook on the wall and throws open the basement door. Smoke pours out into the kitchen as he goes through the door, slams it, and descends noisily into the basement.*)

RALPH. The furnace was always producing something called "clinkers," which clogged the vents and filled the house with smoke. Whenever this happened, The Old Man would rush to the basement with his trusty poker to do battle. The Old Man fought winter tooth and claw, and there was never a let up.

*(RALPH exits. From the basement: Clank! K-Boom! Clank! K-Boom! CLANK!)*

THE OLD MAN *(offstage, with a slight echo: a loud string of thoroughly incomprehensible invective)*. Rassa frassa fram basal frassa! *Summoning bench!*

MOTHER *(trying to cover both boys' ears)*. Little pitchers have big ears!

*(RALPHIE stands, points up toward his room. MOTHER nods her agreement. RALPHIE exits and climbs the stairs. Lights come up on RALPHIE's room as grown-up RALPH enters it.)*

RALPH. The Old Man was just warming up his vocabulary. What he lacked in finesse he more than made up for in sheer ferocity.

THE OLD MAN. The sad oven *mitt's* gone out again! That dog *mad* clanky sunny impinge!

RALPH. My father was one of the most feared Furnace Fighters in Northern Indiana.

THE OLD MAN. Somebody turned it down again! Who the hallelujah turned this Daniel Boone furnace down so low? *(MOTHER looks guilty.)* Open up the dog bone damper, will ya?

MOTHER. What?

THE OLD MAN. The damper! Open the dingblang fuzzle whizzin' damper!

*(MOTHER operates the slide switch on the wall near the basement door. The lights in the kitchen dim. RALPHIE has entered his room. He does not, of course, see RALPH, his future self. RALPHIE listens intently to THE OLD MAN's swearing, grabs his tablet and writes frantically.)*