

Plays for Young Audiences

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

2400 THIRD AVENUE SOUTH
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55404
612-872-5108
FAX 612-874-8119

The Book of Everything

Adapted by
Richard Tulloch

From the novel by
Guus Kuijer

The Book of Everything was originally produced by Theatre of Image at Belvoir St Upstairs Theatre,
Australia, in 2010.

SYNOPSIS

Amsterdam, 1951. Thomas Klopper is aged 9, nearly 10. He sees things others don't see – a hailstorm in summer, tropical fish in the canals, a plague of green frogs...and Jesus. And in his diary, *The Book of Everything*, he writes his greatest hope for the future: 'When I grow up, I'm going to be happy.'

Thomas's father is severe and sometimes violent, trying to insulate his family from the world outside their strict Christian faith. Mr Klopper says the bible is the book of everything that matters.

Thomas's odd imagination is his way of dealing with his secret misery. He finds strength through his down-to-earth chats with Jesus, his love for Eliza-with-the-leather-leg, and the support of rebellious bike-riding, trouser-wearing Auntie Pie and neighbourhood 'witch' Mrs. van Amersfoort. She shows Thomas the power of music and books, and he learns that happiness begins with no longer being afraid.

CHARACTERS

THOMAS KLOPPER, aged 9, nearly 10

MARGOT KLOPPER, aged 16

ELIZA WITH THE LEATHER LEG, aged 16

MOTHER

FATHER /BUMBITER

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

AUNTIE PIE

JESUS

Ensemble (can also be played by above actors):

STREET CHILDREN

CHURCH CONGREGATION

READING OUT LOUD CLUB GUESTS

SETTING

Amsterdam, summer, 1951.

The house of the Klopper family in the “Old South” area of the city. The apartment is austere, with little decoration other than a tropical fish tank and a painting of Jesus.

Next door is the apartment of Mrs. van Amersfoort, lined with books and cluttered with magical knick-knacks.

Other locations are:

The streets of Amsterdam.

Church service house

STYLE

This is an ensemble piece; actors not involved in particular scenes sometimes remain on stage, observing, commenting on the action and supplying sound effects and props as required.

Kim Carpenter’s design for the original production featured a large copy of Thomas’s diary, *The Book of Everything*, standing upstage centre. Pages were turned during the performance to reveal naively painted representations of each different location.

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE

Thomas enters and reads from a brown paper covered diary...

THOMAS

The Book of Everything, by Thomas Klopper, aged 9 (*he crosses it out and writes*) nearly 10. Address: Breughelstraat 16, Amsterdam, Holland, Europe, Northern Hemisphere, Earth, Solar System, Galaxy, Universe, Space. Year: 1951.

Cheerful music.

My family. There are four people in my family. Me, Thomas Klopper, aged nearly 10, Pappa, who is my father. His name is Mr Abel Klopper.

Father enters the acting area, strides stiffly across it and leaves.

My mother is called Mamma, Mrs. Klopper and Jannie. She is very kind to everybody.

Mother crosses the stage, pausing to give a small present to someone in the audience.

My sister is Margot and she is sixteen.

Margot flounces across the acting area.

Margot is stupid.

Margot stops and turns on Thomas, threatening him, then exits.

My neighbours.

Auntie Pie wobbles on, riding a bicycle.

Auntie Pie always rides a bike, even in the rain. She has been riding for forty-eight years, but she is not very good at it.

Auntie Pie and her bike wobble off. Sound of a crash offstage.

Next door to us lives a witch. Her name is Mrs. van Amersfoort and she always wears black dresses.

Mrs. van Amersfoort crosses. She is a little eccentric, muttering to herself as she walks.

Mrs. van Amersfoort gets teased a lot, because she is a witch.

*Two children enter and start teasing her, walking behind her and imitating her gait.
Mrs. van Amersfoort exits too.*

The scariest thing in our neighbourhood is the Bumbiter.

Children run screaming into the acting area. The Bumbiter, a large vicious dog, played by the actor playing Father, springs into the acting area behind them.

He's a dog that dashes down our street, big and wild and mean. Nobody knows where he comes from – he's just there. And he bites you on the bottom!

The Bumbiter, runs around snarling, trying to bite the bottoms of the children, played by the rest of the cast.

They scatter in terror, hands covering their backsides.

The Bumbiter snarls, lost and alone in the space, then he too exits.

SCENE 1

THOMAS

29th July, 1951. I don't know why, but I see things that nobody else can see. I write them all down in my book, *The Book of Everything*. Like today, when I saw a terrible hailstorm in the Jan van Eyckstraat. In the middle of summer!

There is a crash of thunder, and a violent hailstorm starts.

Watching actors make the storm by drumming with wooden spoons, a gathering crescendo, alarming Thomas.

THOMAS

Mamma! Mamma!

He puts his hands over his ears, and runs home as Mother enters.

MOTHER

What is it, Thomas?

THOMAS

Winter's here!

MOTHER

Really? How did you get that idea?

THOMAS

I saw it - a big hailstorm. The leaves were blasted off the trees.

Mother directs his attention offstage to where an actor holds up a green branch.

MOTHER

Thomas, look – the trees are all still green.

ACTOR

(To audience) I've always wanted to play a tree.

Thomas looks, and is surprised at what he sees.

THOMAS

(To Mother) The trees here are green. But round the corner in the Jan van Eyckstraat all the leaves have been ripped off. The whole street is covered in them!

Mother is a little concerned.

MOTHER

If you say so, Thomas.

She ruffles his hair and continues setting up dining table and four chairs for the next scene.

THOMAS

Mamma doesn't believe I saw it, but I know I did! Now where was I? *Thomas writes again.* My favourite colour is blue. My favourite food is appeltaart, yum! My favourite animals are guppies, which are fish. When I grow up I'm going to be a...

He thinks, then crosses something out.

Father enters.

FATHER

I'm home.

Father is home from the office. He kisses Mother as she rushes to take his coat and briefcase.

MOTHER

Thomas, Margot, Pappa's home!

THOMAS

I still don't know what my book's going to be about.

Father goes to the dining table and Mother scurries to get the table ready for dinner.

Margot does gymnastic exercises as Thomas crosses to her.

MARGOT

(Imitating Mother) Thomas, Margot, Pappa's home!

THOMAS

What are books *about*, Margot?

She won't allow herself to get into a philosophical discussion with him.

MARGOT

Thomas – you're such a nine-year-old!

THOMAS

Nearly ten.

MARGOT

You can't even read long words.

THOMAS

I love long words, especially if I don't know what they mean.

MARGOT

Yes, like *ignoramus!*

THOMAS

You think just because you're my big sister, you know everything. Just because you're sixteen you think you're a genius! You are so dumb, Margot!

MARGOT

Dutch language - nine, Maths - ten, English – eight, Geography – nine, History – ten.

THOMAS

(To audience) It's amazing that Margot can get good school reports and still be as dumb as an onion!

They move towards the dining table.

MARGOT

Anyway, all the really good books are about love, and you're too young to know about

things like that.

They sit at the table as Father says grace.

FATHER

Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which of Thy bounty we are about to receive.
Amen.

Father sets a bible firmly on the table.

FATHER

All the really good books are about God. All the important stories are here in the Bible.

MOTHER

(Trying to keep the peace) Books can be about love and God.

But Father must have the last word.

FATHER

Oh? Who reads the books in this house, you or me?

MOTHER

You do.

FATHER

So who knows about books?

MOTHER

(Meekly) You do.

FATHER

Then I'll thank you not to contradict me when you don't know what you're talking about.

Mother serves (mimed) soup. The family eats, in a cold, uncomfortable silence, broken by Thomas...

THOMAS

It hailed really hard in the Jan van Eyckstraat today, Pappa. The leaves were blasted right off the trees.

Mother reaches out to him.

FATHER

It's a sin to tell lies, Thomas. 'Keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips from speaking guile.' Psalm 34.

THOMAS

But I saw it, I really...

FATHER

Thomas!

THOMAS

Sorry, Pappa.

MARGOT

(Emphasizing the long words directed at Thomas) Psychologically defective!

MOTHER

Thomas is all right.

The family eat again, in a protracted silence. When they are finished, Father opens the bible, in a stiff, formal gesture.

FATHER

Tonight we are reading from the Book of Exodus, chapter 5. *(reads)* Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness. And Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.

As he reads, Thomas's attention wanders. He looks around the room, playing with his soup bowl. Mother directs his attention back to Father. Father closes the bible.

Tomorrow we shall read further, about how God punished the pharaoh for disobeying his will.

Mother hustles Thomas out of the room.

MOTHER

Bedtime, Thomas.

She ruffles Thomas's hair.

You do have some funny stuff in there, don't you, my little dreamer? Sometimes I wonder what's going on with you.

THOMAS

Do you think I'm a little bit nice, Mamma?

MOTHER

I think you're very, very, very, very 'a little bit nice'! You're the sweetest boy in the whole world.

She hugs him, trying to hide her tears.

Mother leaves him and Thomas pulls out his book, to write fiercely...

THOMAS

I hate it when Mamma is sad. When I grow up, I'm going to be...I'm going to be happy.

SCENE 2

Church bells ring.

Thomas and Margot walk in the street. Margot wears a headscarf covering her hair.

JESUS ACTOR

That summer in Amsterdam it was boiling hot for a whole week.

Thomas spots something in the (imaginary) canal and dawdles to examine it.

Auntie Pie crosses the stage carrying a bicycle tyre.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

So hot that bicycle tyres melted on the bitumen.

THOMAS

So hot that tropical fish were swimming in the canal. I saw them with my own eyes. Dozens of them. They were guppies, like the ones in our fish tank at home. They're happy fish, that dance through the water like they're in love. But nobody would believe that I saw them in the canal. Hey, look Margot – guppies!

MARGOT

Thomas, we don't have time for these aquatic apparitions!

Eliza enters. Eliza has a 'leather leg', an artificial limb that creaks as she walks. She carries a beach towel, and waves to Margot, a school friend.

ELIZA

Hey, Margot!

MARGOT

Hey, Eliza. Where are you going?

ELIZA

Zandvoort Beach. Where else on a hot Sunday? How about you?

MARGOT

(Indicating her headscarf) Church. We're walking to church.

ELIZA

Oh. Which church do you go to?

MARGOT

It's not even a real church. We go to someone's house in Amsterdam West. Pappa's leading the service today - something else to look forward to. You wouldn't believe how boring it is. *(CALLS)* Thomas!

ELIZA

You're walking to Amsterdam West in this heat? Why don't you catch the tram?

MARGOT

(With irony) Because God wouldn't like it. God doesn't want the trams to run on Sundays.

ELIZA

God doesn't like trams?

MARGOT

Not on Sundays, that's what Pappa says. Apparently the two worst things in the world are being a traitor in the War, and riding in a tram on Sunday. *(Calls)* Thomas!

Thomas leaves the canal and runs to Margot.

THOMAS

They're swimming in the canal, Margot. I can see them! There are fantail guppies and spike swordtails and...

He stops short when he sees Eliza.

ELIZA

Who's this?

MARGOT

It's my brother Thomas. Ignore him. Infantile hallucinations.

ELIZA

Hello, Thomas. I'm Eliza.

It is a magic moment. Thomas is smitten, and unable to meet Eliza's eye. But dropping his gaze means he's looking at her leg.

MARGOT

It's rude to stare at people, Thomas! Don't you know anything?

ELIZA

It's fine, Margot. I'm used to it. See, Thomas, it's just my leather leg. It creaks when I walk.

She creaks around on it, jokingly using it to squeak out a little rhythm.

You want to touch it?

She offers it to him. Thomas reaches out to touch it, but when he gets closer he is too shy and withdraws his hand.

THOMAS

No thank you.

ELIZA

What were you looking at over there?

THOMAS

Tropical fish, in the canal. Guppies.

ELIZA

Where?

Margot can't believe Eliza is paying attention to him.

MARGOT

Eliza, he's nine.

But Eliza joins Thomas staring into the canal.

ELIZA

Oh yes – there they are! People flush them down the toilet when they go on holidays. Did you know there are crocodiles living in the sewers too?

THOMAS

Really? Have you seen them?

ELIZA

Just a little one, swimming in our toilet. Only this big. *(She holds up her little finger – the only one on her deformed hand. Then seeing Thomas staring at it)* Yeah, I've got a funny hand too, haven't I? Hey, that's my tram! Bye Margot, bye Thomas. Wait for me, driver – can't you see I'm a cripple?

She runs off, obviously hobbling, but clearly not embarrassed in the slightest.

THOMAS

(To audience) I felt a sort of electric shock in my stomach. Eliza was so...beautiful. And she understood what I saw.

MARGOT

If you make us late for church, Thomas, Pappa will kill you. Then I'll kill you too.

THOMAS

What happened to Eliza's fingers?

MARGOT

Shut up!

Margot drags him away and they exit.

SCENE 3

Music continues quietly as Thomas and Margot hurry to join Mother and Father as they arrange seating for a church service and greet other parishioners, including Auntie Pie.

FATHER

Peace be with you...peace be with you...peace be with you...Peace be with you, Pie.
(pronounced 'Pee')

AUNTIE PIE

And with you, Abel. *(To Thomas)* Hello, my little sausage – everything ticketty-boo?

She kisses Margot and Thomas.

THOMAS AND MARGOT

Hello, Auntie Pie.

AUNTIE PIE

Phew! Is it hot enough for you or what?

Father greets other parishioners.

FATHER

Peace be with you...peace be with you...peace be with you...

THOMAS

Sunday is a day you have to push in front of you like a wheelbarrow. Other days just roll off the bridge by themselves. On Sunday we aren't allowed to play games, or ride on a tram, or whistle.

A bird calls. Thomas looks up at it.

Only birds can whistle, because they don't know it's Sunday. Birds don't have souls.

Father stands at the front, leading the service.

FATHER

Hear the word of the Lord as it is written in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 9. And the Lord said unto Moses and unto Aaron, Take to you handfuls of ashes of the furnace, and let

Moses sprinkle it toward the heaven in the sight of the Pharaoh...

His voice drones on with the reading as Thomas looks around the congregation.

THOMAS

(To audience, over Father's following speech) Not many people come to our church. They're mostly old or blind or deaf or lame, with warts on their chins. There are only two other children - two sisters who are so pale they're not going to last much longer. I give them till 1955.

FATHER

And it shall become small dust in all the land of Egypt, and shall be a boil breaking forth with blains upon man, and upon beast, and upon all the land of Egypt. And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boil was upon the magicians, and upon all the Egyptians.

THOMAS

That's a lot of boils.

Mother directs Thomas's attention to Father.

MOTHER

(Whispers) Thomas!

FATHER

I want us to think today about the true meaning of those plagues of Egypt. God sent the plagues of Egypt to punish the pharaoh for his wickedness. But those plagues were also a warning to the people of Egypt; the same warning that God sends to us here right now – that a time will come when those that do wrong will have to answer for their sins.

ALL

(Sing) Lord, we like sheep have gone astray
And wandered from Thy fold
O guide us with Thy mighty hand
And lead us from the cold.

A hummed second verse of the hymn continues under...

MARGOT

(To audience) Sunday church service was long...

AUNTIE PIE

(to audience) ...and the seats were hard.

Thomas looks around the congregation.

THOMAS

(to audience) Ladies have to cover their heads when they go to church. You aren't allowed to see their hairdos. It's all right for men – they don't have hairdos.

The hymn ends.

FATHER

(Sings) Almighty God, you see into the uttermost depths of our hearts.

PARISHIONERS

(Sing) Lord God, have mercy on us miserable sinners,
And forgive us our transgressions.

FATHER

You know that we are unworthy.

He nods to Mother who responds, singing alone...

MOTHER

Lord God, have mercy on us miserable sinners,
And forgive us our transgressions.

FATHER

We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed.

He nods to another parishioner, Auntie Pie, who responds...

AUNTIE PIE

(Sings) Lord God, have mercy on us miserable sinners,
And forgive us our transgressions.

FATHER

We are not worthy to be called your children.

He nods to Thomas, who is taken aback, but rises nervously in his place.

THOMAS

(Sings) Lord God, have mercy on us miserable singers,
And forgive us our tram sessions.

The organ music cuts out abruptly and there is a deathly silence.

Margot giggles. Father silences her with a look that could kill.

THOMAS

(Confused) What?

Organ music blares in again.

The parishioners file out of church, clearing the church seats as they go.

SCENE 4

The family walks into their house, Father striding in front.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

As they walked home, Thomas saw that his father was angry about something.

Thomas attempts to break the tension with some light chatter...

THOMAS

I saw guppies today, Pappa. They were swimming in the canal.

Father pointedly ignores him.

JESUS ACTOR

The house was as silent as the grave.

ELIZA ACTOR

Two sparrows on the windowsill blew on shrill trumpets.

JESUS ACTOR

They didn't know it was Sunday.

They sit.

FATHER

Thomas, stand up.

THOMAS

Stand up?

FATHER

Stand!

MOTHER

Why?

FATHER

Because I say so.

MARGOT

(With heavy sarcasm) That's why.

Thomas stands.

FATHER

Would you repeat what you sang during the responses?

Thomas looks at Mother, uncertain.

Look at me and sing!

THOMAS

(Sings tentatively) Lord God, have mercy on us miserable singers...
And forgive us our tram sessions.

MOTHER

He's only nine. He didn't know he was getting the words wrong.

Father stands, menacing, and removes his jacket.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Everything that lived on earth held its breath.

ELIZA ACTOR

The sparrows on the windowsill choked on their trumpets.

JESUS ACTOR

The sun darkened and the sky shrank.

MOTHER

What are you doing?

FATHER

Out of the way, woman. I'm speaking to your son.

Mother draws Thomas protectively towards her.

MOTHER

Please Abel, he just made an honest mistake. I'll make sure he studies the words for next week. Abel...

She steps between Father and Thomas and moves to push him back.

No! Please!

Father slaps her savagely.

Mother stifles a scream and falls to the ground.

The watching actors cover their eyes.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

(To audience) The angels in heaven covered their eyes, because that is what they do when a man hits his wife.

JESUS ACTOR

A deep sadness descended on the earth.

MARGOT

Pappa!

FATHER

Quiet! Thomas, go upstairs. And take the wooden spoon.

Thomas takes the wooden spoon and runs to his room.

The watching actors slap their hands together, creating a rhythm.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

The world was empty. Everything that ever was had been taken away.

JESUS ACTOR

There was only noise.

ELIZA ACTOR

The sound of that slap on his mother's soft cheek.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Thomas heard all the slaps his mother had ever received, a rain of slaps...

MOTHER ACTOR

...like the hail in the Jan van Eyckstraat when the leaves were blasted from the trees.

Thomas presses his hands to his ears and speaks, fitting the words in between the slaps.

THOMAS

God, please (*slap*) punish him (*slap*) with all the plagues (*slap*) of Egypt!

Father enters the room. Thomas stands. Father holds out his hand. Thomas passes him the wooden spoon; he knows what is coming. He pulls down his trousers and bends over a chair.

Father beats Thomas with the wooden spoon. Thomas winces.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

The pain cut like a knife through his skin.

ELIZA ACTOR

At first Thomas thought nothing, but then the words came flooding into his head.

THOMAS

He-hit-Mamma! He-hit-Mamma!

MARGOT ACTOR

Words and pain, the swish of the wooden spoon, more pain and more words...

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Terrible words that he had never thought before.

THOMAS

There is no God! There is no God! There is no God!

The beating stops.

FATHER

Lord God...repeat after me, Thomas!

THOMAS

Lord God...

FATHER

Have mercy on us miserable *sinner*s.

THOMAS

Have mercy on us miserable sinners.

FATHER

And forgive us our *transgressions!*

THOMAS

And forgive us our transgressions.

FATHER

'Lord have mercy on us miserable sinners and forgive us our transgressions'. You will stay here and repeat that one hundred times correctly, and then come downstairs.

He leaves the room.

THOMAS

Dear God, will you please exist? All the plagues of Egypt please, on Pappa. He hit Mamma, and it wasn't the first time! (*calls*) God?

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

God was silent in every language.

JESUS ACTOR

The angels tried to dry their eyes.

ELIZA ACTOR

But their handkerchiefs were so wet with tears that it began to rain, even in the desert.

SCENE 5

THOMAS

The Book of Everything. On September 21st, 1951, Mrs. van Amersfoort put a spell on the Bumbiter.

Music, jaunty and loud.

Children play with a skipping rope in the street.

Mrs. van Amersfoort enters, carrying a heavy shopping bag.

The children stop skipping to taunt...

CHILD

Hey, Mrs. van Amersfoort, did you forget your broomstick?

CHILD

Where's your black cat, Mrs. van Amersfoort?

CHILD

What's in the bag, Mrs. van Amersfoort?

CHILD

Toad's guts for her witch's brew!

CHILD

Turn him into a frog, Mrs. van Amersfoort! Go on, I dare you!

They thread the skipping rope through the shopping bag handles and jerk it away from her, causing groceries to spill out.

CHILD

Look out, she'll put a spell on you!

The Bumbiter enters, snarling and running around, trying to catch children, who scatter, shrieking...

CHILDREN

The Bumbiter! The Bumbiter!

The Bumbiter corners Thomas.

Thomas tries to run, but bumps into Mrs. van Amersfoort.

The Bumbiter comes towards them, but Mrs. van Amersfoort stops him, raising her hands above her head, like an angry bear.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Hey! Hey!

The Bumbiter hesitates.

Mrs. van Amersfoort mutters indistinct words at the growling Bumbiter. It sounds for all the world like a witch's incantation...

That's enough of that, you silly bugger, settle down, settle down. Don't you snarl at me, boy, I'm up to your tricks. You won't get anywhere curling that lip; I've seen your teeth before. That'll do, I said, that'll do!

The Bumbiter backs off, whimpering.

Yes, now go home! Home! You poor mad bugger, I know you can't help it. But go home, understand? Home!

The Bumbiter snarls. Then he wanders off.

Thomas is left with Mrs. van Amersfoort. He helps her to pick up the groceries.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I've had it up to here with that nonsense. Thank you.

THOMAS

Can I carry your bag inside for you?

ELIZA ACTOR

He said it before he knew it.

She stares at him, summing him up.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Thomas heard a hissing in his ears. His heart pounded and he desperately hoped that Mrs. van Amersfoort would say no.

THOMAS

Can I carry your bag inside for you?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Thank you. That's very kind.

Thomas has to make an enormous effort to lift the bag.

It's not too heavy for you, is it? You're such a big boy.

'Magic moment' music chord.

Suddenly Thomas can lift the bag easily, and he follows her along the street.

SCENE 6

Thomas follows Mrs. van Amersfoort and puts down the bag just inside the door.

THOMAS

There you are.

He wants to go, but Mrs. van Amersfoort directs him further into the house.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Just put it over here.

Thomas moves the bag, and again turns to go, but she presses on...

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Sit anywhere you can, Thomas.

He sits, awkwardly.

THOMAS

You know my name!

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

We're neighbours, aren't we - those walls are thin. I'm sorry about the mess. I'm a bit of a jackdaw, you see. I can't stop myself collecting paraphernalia – too much furniture, knick-knacks, bric-a-brac, superfluous to my needs...

THOMAS

(to audience) ...piles of newspapers and magazines and books; across the ceiling glided a huge bird with wings outstretched and a black cat was sleeping on a globe of the world. Now I knew for certain that it was true. This was the house of a witch.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

It looks like a witch's house, doesn't it?

THOMAS

No. Not really. *(To audience)* I didn't yet know if it was the scary house of a scary witch. That remained to be seen.

Mrs. van Amersfoort forces a glass of bright red liquid into Thomas's hand.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Here – you've earned a drink. Blood!

Thomas hesitates. She sees his distress and is amused.

It's cordial!

She pours a slug from the bottle into a glass for herself, turning it red.

THOMAS

Oh. Thank you, Missus.

They both drink.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

It's damned nice to have you here. Damned nice. I don't get enough visitors. My children left home long ago, and I don't have a husband since...oh no, you're too young to remember the war. The Nazis, they...executed my husband.

THOMAS

Oh. What's 'executed'?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

He was in the Resistance. Traitors gave him away – poor buggers were afraid for their own skins of course- so the Nazis caught him. They put him up against that wall out there, and they shot him dead.

THOMAS

Oh. I see.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Thomas felt a terrible sadness in his throat and in his stomach. The same sadness he felt when, year in and year out, they nailed Jesus to the cross.

ELIZA ACTOR

He was always relieved when Jesus rose from his grave again, healthy and well.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Mustn't dwell on it too much, only gets you down. Here, have you ever seen one of these?

She opens an old gramophone.

THOMAS

A gramophone!

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Listen to this...

She puts on a record. A stream of beautiful, achingly sad violin music is heard, and continues as...Jesus appears, dressed as he is in the painting in Thomas's living room.

JESUS

Hello, Thomas.

THOMAS

(Amazed) Hello...Lord Jesus.

JESUS

It's a cruel world, isn't it, Thomas? People executed, for nothing.

THOMAS

They...executed you too, Lord Jesus. They do it every Easter.

JESUS

(Smiles) I won't let them nail me to that cross ever again. Damned if I will. I've had it up to here with that nonsense. Still, mustn't dwell on it too much. Only gets you down.

He disappears. The music continues...

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Beautiful, isn't it?

THOMAS

Yes.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Beethoven. When I listen to this...

THOMAS

Me too.

In an abstract movement sequence the actors stage the following action...

ELIZA ACTOR

The globe of the world with the sleeping cat began to turn. Mrs. van Amersfoort's heavy chair hung in the air above the floor, like a low cloud.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Thomas dreamed he was soaring over green fields, and a castle with a Rolls Royce in the driveway. A fairytale princess, in a sky blue dress, a white collar and a leather leg, waved at him with her little finger. Her father stood on the battlements playing the violin, and her mother sang sweetly.

The music and movement sequence end, but the record continues to scratch. Mrs. van Amersfoort stares into the distance. Uncomfortable pause, then ...

THOMAS

You've sure got a lot of books, Mrs. van Amersfoort. What are they all about?

She snaps out of her trance and turns off the gramophone.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Heavens! Books are about everything! Do you like reading?

THOMAS

Yes.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Wait, maybe I've got something for you.

She searches her bookshelves.

What would you be interested in? What do you want to be when you grow up?

THOMAS

Happy. When I grow up I want to be happy.

A beat, then...

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

That's a damned good idea. And where does happiness begin?

THOMAS

Oh, um... *(He doesn't have an answer to this.)*

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Happiness begins with not being afraid any more. *She hands him a book.* Emil and the Detectives. It's about a boy who doesn't want to be afraid, and who fights against injustice. You keep it.

THOMAS

Thank you.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

You were very brave today. You came inside with me, when all the other children say I'm a witch. They're right too. I am a witch.

The muffled voices of his Father and Mother are heard off. We can't hear their exact words, but the impression is of an ugly domestic row.

FATHER (off)

What do you mean, 'the money's never enough?'

MOTHER (off)

I do my best – you can't say I don't!

FATHER (off)

Any fool could do those books, you don't have to be Einstein!

MOTHER (off)

You could have enough respect not to call me a fool.

FATHER (off)

The way you behave, what else can I call you?

It is quiet again. Thomas gets up.

THOMAS

It's after five thirty. I have to go home. Thank you, Mrs. van Amersfoort.

He stops in the doorway.

Thank you for everything.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

You're more than welcome, Thomas. You won't be afraid any more?

THOMAS

Not of witches anyway.

He leaves.

Outside in the street Thomas comes face to face with Eliza.

ELIZA

Hello, Thomas.

THOMAS

Hello. Eliza.

He tries to leave.

ELIZA

What's wrong? Are you afraid?

THOMAS

Afraid?

ELIZA

Afraid to talk to me?

THOMAS

I...I have to go.

He runs off to escape into his house.

She smiles and leaves.

SCENE 7

Mother and Father are at the dining table, poring over a ledger. The row has cooled but the atmosphere is tense.

FATHER

How can twenty-five guilders just disappear?

MOTHER

I try to manage with the money you give me, but the prices in the shops go up all the time.

FATHER

It's so simple. Write down what you spend each day.

MOTHER

I do! But the shopkeepers don't always have time to write receipts and sometimes when I get home I forget how much I...

They look up as Thomas enters and try to compose themselves.

I should get dinner ready.

FATHER

Finish the housekeeping budget first!

Thomas enters and goes to kiss Mother. She protects one cheek.

THOMAS

The other cheek, Mamma.

MOTHER

Why?

THOMAS

Because.

He makes a point of kissing it particularly tenderly.

FATHER

Where did you get that book, Thomas?

THOMAS

(Mumbles) From Mrs. van Amersfoort.

FATHER

Who?

THOMAS

Mrs. van Amersfoort.

FATHER

You just bumped into Mrs. van Amersfoort and she said, 'Here's a book for you'?

THOMAS

It didn't happen like that.

FATHER

How did it happen then?

THOMAS

I carried her shopping bag inside.

MOTHER

How sweet of you! That poor woman is all alone...

FATHER

I don't want you going in there.

MOTHER

Why not?

FATHER

That woman is a communist. If the Russians come, she'll be cheering in the street. And we Christians will all be turned into slaves.

MOTHER

(Disbelieving) Oh, Abel!

FATHER

What is the book?

Thomas puts it on the table.

THOMAS

Emil and the Detectives.

Father picks it up and reads...

FATHER

...by Erich Kastner. He's probably a communist too.

MOTHER

It's a children's book. What harm can it do?

Father gives the book back to Thomas.

FATHER

You are to take it back tomorrow, Thomas. Then you are never to go there again, understand?

MOTHER

Can I make the supper now?

FATHER

So how are we going to meet the housekeeping budget this month?

MOTHER

I'll make it up out of my clothing allowance.

FATHER

No need for that. Here.

He gives her a banknote.

Next time, make that housekeeping money last.

MOTHER

I will.

Thomas goes to his room.

THOMAS

The best place for thinking is beside an open window.

(Writes) The Book of Everything... Dear Eliza, maybe you think you're not pretty because you've got a leather leg that creaks when you walk. But you are the prettiest girl in the world. I think one day you will live in a castle with a Rolls Royce in the driveway. I'm not writing this because I want to be your boyfriend. I know that's impossible because you are sixteen, and I am only nine... *He crosses this out and replaces it with...* nearly ten. I am writing this because it is true.

I'll never be brave enough to really write that to Eliza.

Mother approaches.

MOTHER

Thomas.

Thomas quickly hides his book and pretends to be reading Emil and the Detectives.

THOMAS

Mamma.

She picks up the novel and flips the pages.

MOTHER

Mrs. van Amersfoort saved people from the Nazis too. Her husband gave his life for our freedom. When they shot Mr van Amersfoort, the Nazis made us all watch, to teach us a lesson.

THOMAS

Was I there? And Margot?

MOTHER

Yes. You were just a baby in my arms. As far as I'm concerned, you can go in there any time.

THOMAS

(Surprised) Good. But Pappa said...

MOTHER

Don't let your father find out.

A beat.

THOMAS

Mamma, are you happy?

MOTHER

Yes, Thomas. I'm happy because you make me happy. You're my little hero.

She ruffles his hair and leaves.

Thomas writes again, on a loose sheet of paper this time.

THOMAS

Dear Eliza, I don't dare to write this, but I'm doing it anyway. Maybe you think you're not pretty because you've got a leather leg...

Watching actors speak snippets of Thomas's letter to Eliza, overlapping their words, building the pace, underscored by violin music, adding at the end...

ALL

I am writing this because it is true.

Thomas completes his letter, folds it and adds on the back...

THOMAS

For Eliza.

SCENE 8

Thomas takes the letter into the street and arrives at a post box. He's about to drop the letter into it, then hesitates.

Mrs. van Amersfoort appears.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Where does happiness begin? With not being afraid any more.

THOMAS

That's easy for you to say. You're a witch.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Maybe I'm a witch *because* I'm not afraid any more.

Thomas jams the letter into the post box.

He immediately regrets doing it and wants to get it back, but in a movement sequence it is carried away, passing through several sets of hands, then flying through the sky, arriving in the hands of Eliza.

Thomas tries to chase it at first but, when confronted with Eliza, he backs off and hides his face in Emil and the Detectives.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Thomas wouldn't be able to go outside now, not ever again. What would he do if he met Eliza in the street? Maybe he could try ducking into a doorway, or hiding behind a fat lady, like Emil does in *Emil and the Detectives*.

THOMAS

(reads) 'Emil took a pin that he found in his lapel, stuck it through the envelope and banknotes and finally through the lining of his jacket.' *(to audience)* He's worried about crooks stealing his money. *(reads)* 'You might say that he had nailed the money tight. There, he thought, now nothing can happen.'

(To audience) *Emil and the Detectives* isn't a book about God. It's about a German boy in Berlin. It seems that Emil never has to go to church, which is weird.

Margot enters.

MARGOT

Thomas, what was it like in there?

THOMAS

Where?

MARGOT

In the witch's house.

THOMAS

How would I know?

MARGOT

I know very well you went inside.

She grabs the scruff of his neck.

So? What was it like?

Margot 'tortures' Thomas, twisting his nose.

THOMAS

Not telling.

MARGOT

What was it like?

Thomas is in pain, but in the battle of wills he resists valiantly.

I'll *make* you tell me, you pathetic little invertebrate!

THOMAS

No you won't, you...superfluous bric-a-brac!

Margot is impressed and amused. She releases Thomas.

MARGOT

Go on, what was it like in there?

THOMAS

Different.

MARGOT

What do you mean 'different'?

THOMAS

Different from here.

MOTHER (off)

(calls) Margot, Thomas, dinner's ready.

MARGOT

We'll talk...soon.

She propels him towards the dining room, where they join Mother and Father at the table.

Father sharpens a carving knife on a steel.

MARGOT

That's a razor sharp knife, eh, Pap?

FATHER

You could skin an old cow with this.

MARGOT

(Making slicing actions with relish) Slit, slash, straight through.

FATHER

If there's one thing I hate, it's a blunt knife.

He finishes sharpening.

Let us pray. Lord God, we thank Thee for Thy bountiful gifts. Thou givest us each day our daily bread, and you minister also to our spiritual wants, forgiving all our sins, including those we name now in the silence of our hearts.

As the family prays silently, Jesus appears.

JESUS

Hey, Thomas. How's it going?

THOMAS

Good, Lord Jesus.

JESUS

Just good or super good?

THOMAS

Just good.

JESUS

Don't be afraid, little feller. You can tell me. And I won't pass it on. Cross my heart and hope to die.

A beat as Thomas looks at Jesus and considers the implications of this expression.

THOMAS

He shouldn't hit Mamma.

JESUS

Who shouldn't hit Mamma?

THOMAS

You know.

JESUS

I haven't got the foggiest.

THOMAS

That's what Grandpa always says!

Jesus smiles and shrugs.

I'm talking about Pappa hitting Mamma.

JESUS

God Almighty! Has he got a screw loose or what?

THOMAS

That's what Auntie Pie always says!

FATHER

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...

JESUS

That'll be me. Gotta go, Thomas.

He disappears.

FATHER, MOTHER AND MARGOT

Amen.

MOTHER

Smakelijk eten, allemaal. (*Pron: Smark-lick ay-ter, ulla-marl*)

ALL

Smakelijk eten.

THOMAS

(To audience) That's Dutch for 'tuck in'.

The doorbell rings.

MOTHER

Could somebody answer that please?

Thomas goes to the door and returns with a letter.

THOMAS

Eliza has written back to me already! If it's an angry letter, I don't want to go on living. I'll drown myself in the canal with the tropical guppies.

He examines the letter.

"To Mr A. Klopper" that's not me, that's my father. Why is Eliza writing to my father? "From Mrs. van Amersfoort." This is even worse! A national disaster! Mrs. van Amersfoort is a witch, and an economist too. Who'll get the blame if Pappa reads this? Thomas! Or Mamma.

MOTHER

Thomas, your dinner's getting cold.

FATHER

Thomas!

THOMAS

I'll have to tear it up.

He tears the envelope, and a letter falls out. He picks it up and reads it.

"A man who hits his wife dishonours himself".

MOTHER

Thomas, what are you doing?

THOMAS

Just a minute!

He looks for a hiding place for the letter.

ELIZA ACTOR

Why were his fingers shaking?

JESUS ACTOR

Why did his stomach feel as if he'd swallowed a hippopotamus?

AUNTIE PIE

Because he was doing something that was absolutely forbidden.

Thomas stuffs the letter into his pocket and returns to the table.

MOTHER

Who was there, Thomas?

THOMAS

Just...some little kids. Mucking about.

Mother knows something is going on. Father opens the bible.

FATHER

Let us hear the word of the Lord.

(Reads) And the Lord said unto Moses: Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he will not let the people go. Behold I will strike with my rod the water of the Nile, and it shall be turned into blood. And all the fishes that are in the river shall die.

THOMAS

The guppies too? It wasn't the fishes' fault that the pharaoh was a bad man.

FATHER

What did you say, Thomas?

THOMAS

'The pharaoh was a bad man.'

FATHER

Yes, and God turned the water into blood to warn him not to do wrong. That was the first plague of Egypt. Tomorrow we'll read about the second. In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

All clear the table and leave Thomas alone. He is hatching a plot in his mind.

THOMAS

God turned the water into blood...!

SCENE 9

The street. Bright music.

Thomas passes furtively, still hiding his face behind Emil and the Detectives.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

The letter from Mrs van Amersfoort was burning a hole in Thomas's pocket.

Thomas takes out the letter.

THOMAS

(Reads) 'A man who hits his wife dishonours himself.' Maybe it's a magic spell. A spell that can change people into something different. If I could keep this...somewhere secret...*(notices the page of the book)* like Emil did when he pinned the money!

He fumbles in his pocket, finds a safety pin, and starts to pin the letter inside his shirt.

Eliza appears.

ELIZA

(Calls) Thomas!

THOMAS

Oh no!

Thomas tries to escape.

She tries to whistle through her fingers to capture his attention. She fails at the first attempt and the watching Jesus Actor does it for her.

Thomas hurriedly finishes pinning the letter into his shirt and feigns nonchalance.

THOMAS

Oh, hi.

ELIZA

I got your letter.

THOMAS

Oh.

ELIZA

Listen, Thomas... That was the most... the most beautiful letter anyone ever sent me.

THOMAS

Oh.

ELIZA

I'm going to keep it forever. And I'll read it whenever I'm sad.

THOMAS

Oh.

ELIZA

You're a really, really sweet boy. When I'm living in my castle, you come and visit any time. I'll take you for a ride in my Rolls Royce.

She kisses him on the cheek and leaves.

AUNTIE PIE

It was amazing! A kiss from Eliza in the middle of the street. For a letter! Thomas jumped for joy and to his amazement he was so light he rose two metres into the air.

THOMAS

I must write letters to everybody. It makes them happy. And it makes them like me.

Thomas enters Mrs van Amersfoort's house.

Mrs Van Amersfoort pours Thomas a glass of red cordial.

THOMAS

I finished reading *Emil and the Detectives*.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

And?

THOMAS

I liked how the children all helped Emil, and how they caught the crook. That idea of pinning the letter inside his shirt was really good too.

MRS VAN AMERFOORT

The letter?

THOMAS

I mean, the money.

Pause.

Can I ask you something? It's a bit of a weird question really.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I have a weird question for you too. Your one first.

THOMAS

Can I take the cordial home with me?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Why not just drink it here?

THOMAS

I mean the whole bottle.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Why do you want the whole bottle?

Then seeing that Thomas is hesitant about answering...

Fine, I'll buy another one.

THOMAS

Thank you.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Now my weird question. Here it comes. Thomas, do you get hit at home?

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

The shock was like a kick in the stomach.

JESUS ACTOR

The cat jumped off the globe of the world and stretched.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Do you get hit, Thomas?

THOMAS

Me? No.

Long pause. The actors and Mrs van Amersfoort watch Thomas attentively.

(To audience) I just get a spanking sometimes. It's Mamma who gets hit. Jesus, Mamma what should I do?

He shakes his head. No. Not me.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

That's good. Shall we listen to some more music?

THOMAS

I have to go soon.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Fine. Let's see if there's another book for you.

She takes one from the shelf.

Aha! This one I want back.

It's called *Alone in the World*, but I'm lending it to you to show you that you're not alone in the world.

THOMAS

Thanks. Can I take the cordial?

He takes the bottle and leaves, then enters his own house and sneaks to the fish tank.

THOMAS

All the plagues of Egypt, God! Please, please, please God, I humbly beseech thee, if you do exist, smite Pappa with all the plagues of Egypt!

*He pours the cordial into the fish tank, turning the water bright red. (In the original production this was done by rolling a sheet of translucent red plastic up the side of the fish tank – with no attempt made to conceal how the 'magic' was effected.)
Thomas leaves.*

Margot enters and sees the red water.

She is amused at first, then lets out a bloodcurdling scream.

MARGOT

The water's in the fish tank's turned to blood!

Father, Mother and Thomas run on and look at the fish tank in horror.

FATHER

Hey!

THOMAS

Hey!

Blackout.

INTERVAL

ACT TWO

SCENE 10

Music.

Then suddenly we're back to a reprise of the action at the end of Act One.

MARGOT

The water in the fish tank's turned to blood!

Father and Mother come running, with Thomas behind them.

FATHER

Hey!

THOMAS

Hey!

MOTHER

What happened?

MARGOT

It's a plague of Egypt right here in Amsterdam South.

THOMAS

Goodness! That's impossible!

MOTHER

You'll have to change that water, Thomas.

FATHER

No, that water stays right there.

MARGOT

(Stifling giggles) It's a miraculous Act of God!

FATHER

In the time of the pharaoh there were tricksters who turned the Nile water red. The pharaoh's magicians. They said, if God can do it, so can we.

MARGOT

How did they do that then?

FATHER

I don't know, but they were sent by the devil, that is certain.

MOTHER

Maybe there's some sort of bacteria in the water.

FATHER

I don't think so. I think the bacterium is in this room. A human bacterium, who thinks it is funny to mock God's almighty power.

MARGOT

A magician!

FATHER

An imposter, like the pharaoh's magicians.

MARGOT

Hey, this is exciting, Pappa.

MOTHER

I'll change the water after dinner.

FATHER

You'll do no such thing. 'The fish died and began to stink', that's what it says in the Good Book.

There is a tense pause.

MARGO

We read a good book at school last week. It's about this boy who finds a magic sword that gives him special powers...

FATHER

This is not a joke, Margot. There is only one true book in this world and that is the Bible. The books you read at school are written by sinful people who are like the pharaoh's magicians. They write books, but they are false books.

MARGOT

Oh.

FATHER

Read them wisely and take care that your heart belongs to the Bible.

He opens the bible and reads...

“Then God said to Moses, ‘Go to the pharaoh and tell him to let my people go. And if he will not, then I will send a plague of frogs. The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall force their way into his house, and into his bed, everywhere the frogs shall come. And so it came to pass, that the frogs covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians did the same with their rods, and they too summoned the frogs, through the whole land of Egypt.

He marks the spot and closes the bible.

Mother rises.

MARGOT

They were clever, those magicians.

FATHER

The devil is terribly clever.

Mother fetches a bucket and a rubber hose.

What are you doing?

MOTHER

Changing the water.

FATHER

What did I say?

MOTHER

If we don't change it, the guppies will die.

FATHER

A good lesson for our evil sorceror.

MOTHER

I don't think so.

FATHER

You heard what I said, woman. Stop that immediately!

MARGOT

Pappa, can you help me with my geometry?

FATHER

I'm counting to three.

MOTHER

You do that.

FATHER

One, two...three!

He kicks over the bucket.

MARGOT

(Yells) Pappa, the bible was written by people! Not by God, by people!

Father steps up to Mother and slaps her. She recoils, then deliberately hits back, furiously swinging at him, seldom connecting. But he is stronger and knocks her to the ground.

There is a clap of thunder and a storm begins.

The doorbell rings.

Silence.

FATHER

Who could that be?

THOMAS

Lord Jesus.

Father kneels by Mother.

FATHER

Upstairs. Here, take a handkerchief.

Mother leaves.

The bell rings again and Mrs van Amersfoort is heard off...

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT (off)

Neighbour? Could I borrow a cup of sugar?

FATHER

Er, yes. Wait a minute, Mrs van Amersfoort. I'll bring it out to you.

He hurries to get a cup of sugar.

But Margot goes to open the door and Mrs van Amersfoort enters, a cup in her hand.

Father returns with the (mimed) sugar in a cup.

FATHER

Oh, you brought a cup yourself.

He pours sugar into her cup.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Is your wife not here?

FATHER

She's not feeling well.

MRS VAN AMERFOORT

Oh dear, what's the problem?

FATHER

Stomach ache.

THOMAS

(to audience) It was amazing. Pappa was afraid!

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Maybe we should have a talk.

FATHER

A talk?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Think about it. Hey, Thomas, give your mother a kiss from me. Thank you for the sugar.

She leaves. Father sinks to his knees and prays.

FATHER

Lord God, forgive me for losing control. What must I do to bring this family to you?
Help your humble servant O Lord, this I pray, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

THOMAS

I'm going upstairs. Shall I take the wooden spoon?

FATHER

No, son. Come here.

He reaches out his arm, but Thomas steps back, and goes to where mother sits.

MOTHER

Please don't do that again, Thomas. No more plagues of Egypt, all right?

THOMAS

No, Mamma.

He goes to sit by the window and prays...

Lord God, don't forgive him. Never forgive him!

Jesus appears.

JESUS

Hey, Thomas, everything ticketty-boo?

THOMAS

No.

JESUS

Why? What's up?

THOMAS

To tell the truth, we don't like you very much just now, Lord Jesus.

JESUS

Hey, what's all this? Didn't I save humanity?

THOMAS

Save us from what, may I ask?

JESUS

Well, you know...

THOMAS

I haven't got the foggiest.

Jesus laughs.

JESUS

Okay, okay, you'll understand when you grow up.

THOMAS

If you say so, Lord Jesus.

JESUS

I'm glad you exist, Thomas. You're strong, Thomas, strong because you're kind. Will you remember that? We're all proud of you up there. *(He gestures to the heavens)* Do you believe me?

THOMAS

Yes, Lord Jesus.

JESUS

Hey, just call me 'Jesus'.

He picks up the book.

What're you reading? "Alone in the World". They can't mean you, Thomas. You're my favourite. You're not alone in the world. And my angels can't wait for you to join us in heaven.

This doesn't sound too good to Thomas, but he politely answers...

THOMAS

Oh. Great, Jesus.

Jesus would like to stay, but he has run out of things to say. It's getting a bit awkward as he backs off.

JESUS

Yes, well...

THOMAS

Nice of you to drop in.

JESUS

You need a hand with that? *(The red coloured fishtank.)*

Jesus changes the water back to normal, simply rolling down the red plastic, then playfully behaving as if he has just performed an amazing miracle, showing that there is nothing up his sleeves.

He smiles shyly, waves and disappears.

SCENE 11

Thomas writes in his book...

THOMAS

I remember everything. I forget nothing. I write everything down so that later I'll know exactly what happened. One day in 1951, the frogs came.

Sounds of croaking of many frogs. Green table tennis balls are thrown by the audience (who have been armed with them during interval and instructed in their use) and bounce on the stage.

At first I thought the street had turned green. But then I saw it was moving. The Breughelstraat was covered with frogs. So was the Apollo Lane.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT ACTOR

The frogs gathered by the door.

ELIZA ACTOR

They climbed on each others' backs and piled themselves high against the wall of the house. The smell of canal water was overpowering.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

Thousands of frogs, drumming on the front door like a million fingers.

THOMAS

(calls) I didn't do it, Mamma! I had nothing to do with it! *Thomas calls out the window.* Hallo, frogs! Hallo, I'm Thomas! Mamma doesn't want any more plagues of Egypt! So go back to the creeks and canals. Please!

The frogs' sound dies down as actors sweep up the ping pong ball frogs.

JESUS ACTOR

Jesus swept.

ELIZA ACTOR

It was quiet, way into the far distance. The front door stopped shaking.

Margot enters, and sees Thomas talking out the window.

THOMAS

Thank you, frogs. Thank you for coming.

MARGOT

Thomas, what are you doing?

THOMAS

Shhh!

MARGOT

What were you doing?

THOMAS

There were frogs – heaps of them. But Mamma doesn't want...

MARGOT

What doesn't Mamma want?

THOMAS

The plagues of Egypt.

MARGOT

Thomas, how many frogs were there?

THOMAS

Millions.

MARGOT

Really? Did you see them yourself?

THOMAS

With my own eyes.

Margot puts an arm around his shoulders.

MARGOT

You can't always believe your eyes. Thomas, you mustn't let things get to you.

THOMAS

No.

MARGOT

Thomas?

THOMAS

Yes?

MARGOT

You know what Eliza said to me? "You've got a really nice brother."

THOMAS

Oh.

MARGOT

And you know what? Eliza's right.

She sits next to him.

THOMAS

What does 'dishonour' mean?

MARGOT

It means losing your honour. For example...I can't think of an example.

THOMAS

Doesn't matter. But what's honour?

MARGOT

Wait, I know. It means losing your dignity.

THOMAS

Ah. What's dignity? Margot, listen to this.

Thomas pulls out the letter and reads....

A man who hits his wife dishonours himself.

Margot takes the letter.

MARGOT

Who gave you this? This is sooo true!

THOMAS

Not telling. It's a secret.

MARGOT

Pappa has to read this!

THOMAS

What if he gets angry?

MARGOT

He has to. He really has to.

Father enters.

FATHER

I'm home!

THOMAS

Not yet.

Margot watches as he pins the letter inside his shirt again.

SCENE 12

Mother enters, with a wad of cotton in her nose.

Father takes something from his coat pocket.

FATHER

Look what I found on the doorstep -a frog!

He examines it, and shows it to them.

The poor little creature is so scared he's got his hands in front of his eyes. Here, off you go, little feller!

Quite gently he releases the frog out the door.

MARGOT

Something funny happened to me today too. I was sent out of my Dutch literature class.

FATHER

Oh? Why was that?

MARGOT

Mr de Rijp said I was a know-all, and he chucked me out.

THOMAS

What's a know-all?

FATHER

Someone who thinks they know better about everything, and that is very annoying. What exactly did you say to Mr de Rijp?

MARGOT

I told Mr de Rijp I wasn't reading the sinful books on our library list. I said the Bible was enough for me; other books are false.

FATHER

Now, um, listen to me Margot. You misunderstood me. In the books you have to read at school, there are opinions of men. In the Bible, you don't find opinions, but truths. Because the Bible is God's Word.

MARGOT

That's exactly what I told Mr de Rijk.

FATHER

That doesn't mean that you have licence to give your teacher cheek. Tomorrow...

MARGOT

I was only saying what you taught me.

FATHER

Tomorrow...

MARGOT

What's for dinner, Mam?

MOTHER

Pea soup.

FATHER

Tomorrow, you will go to Mr de Rijk and apologise.

MARGOT

Sure. Do you want me to do your hair tonight, Mam?

MOTHER

Lovely.

FATHER

What is this world coming to? You will read all the books that you should read, understand?

MARGOT

Yes, Pap. I could French braid it for you, Mam.

MOTHER

That would be good, Margot.

Thomas pulls out his book.

THOMAS

Do you know *Alone in the World*? It's about a boy who's alone in the world. It's sad, but exciting too.

MOTHER

Help me in the kitchen, Thomas.

FATHER

(To Mother) Why don't you say something? She's your daughter too.

MOTHER

Oh, you say it so much better than I can.

FATHER

(To Thomas) Where did you get that book, Thomas?

MARGOT

From me.

FATHER

Oh. And where did you get it?

MARGOT

Santa Claus. Years ago.

FATHER

Let us pray. Lord God, we beg Thy forgiveness for our innumerable sins. Please lead us in Thy ways, and teach us to follow Thy paths, that we may truly be Thy servants. You see our weaknesses and you know that we too often are tempted to forsake righteousness...

As he continues his muttered prayer, Jesus appears.

JESUS

Listen, Thomas...

THOMAS

Oh hi, Jesus.

JESUS

...I had problems with my Father too. Ooh, he was a strict old codger! I had to get nailed on that cross whether I liked it or not.

THOMAS

I suppose that wasn't nice.

JESUS

No, it was not nice. Once and never again. And now I've lost him.

THOMAS

Who?

JESUS

God the Father. I can't find him anywhere. He's not in Heaven – weird. He disappeared after you got your last beating. It was too much for him.

THOMAS

Do you think so?

JESUS

I think he loved you, Thomas, and he couldn't stand watching that any more. That's my personal opinion.

FATHER

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

THOMAS

See you, Jesus.

JESUS

Hoo-roo!

He leaves.

Father opens the bible to read...

FATHER

Behold, I will send swarms of flies upon thee, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thy houses: and the houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground whereon they are.

The doorbell rings.

Thomas rushes to get a fly spray, then runs to answer the door.

SCENE 13

Auntie Pie enters.

AUNTIE PIE

Hel-lo my dear boy!

THOMAS

Hello, Auntie Pie.

She hugs him.

AUNTIE PIE

Oh, aren't you a sweet little sausage! Everything ticketty-boo?

Auntie Pie releases Thomas, then strides into the room and announces...

Guess what? Benno hit me! And you know why? Because I bought a pair of slacks. My husband hit me for wearing trousers! Has he got a screw loose or what?

FATHER

Margot and Thomas, go to your rooms. Auntie Pie and I have something to discuss.

AUNTIE PIE

Oh no, everyone ought to know about this. Margot, Thomas, your Uncle Ben hit your Auntie Pie for wearing trousers. There!

MOTHER

Sit down, Pie. Would you like some coffee?

Auntie Pie sits.

AUNTIE PIE

And now I think that you (*pointing to Father*) as his oldest brother, have to talk to him and tell him this is not right. Otherwise I'm standing outside our house with a placard – "Mr Klopper hits his wife for wearing trousers." I mean, has he got a screw loose or what?

FATHER

Calm down, Pie. It is in fact the case that the man is the head of the family...

AUNTIE PIE

That doesn't mean that he has to go round slapping people willy-nilly.

FATHER

Hear me out, Pie. It's the man's duty to lead and guide his wife and children. If they won't listen to him, what else can he do but...?

AUNTIE PIE

Belt them?

FATHER

...be firm with them! That is what God has ordained. God has also ordained that women wear skirts and men wear trousers...

This sounds like total nonsense to Auntie Pie.

AUNTIE PIE

What *are* you talking about?

FATHER

...and if you so stubbornly resist God's will, your husband has the right, indeed the duty, to use a firm hand to bring you to righteousness.

AUNTIE PIE

Really? I see you're completely useless. But I'm telling you, if he hits me one more time I'm walking out of that house and never coming back. And from now on I'm only wearing trousers! You watch me. *(With a wink to Thomas)* What do you reckon, sausage?

(To Mother) What happened to your nose? I hope *you* didn't resist God's will?

MOTHER

No.

AUNTIE PIE

Only joking. How did you get that fat nose then?

MOTHER

I just...bumped into something.

MARGOT

The fish tank, eh Pap?

THOMAS

(Aside) Don't do it, Margot. Don't give cheek!

AUNTIE PIE

(Measured) Yes, they can be dangerous, those fish tanks. I'm personally always bumping into them, especially with my nose.

MOTHER

Shall I put the kettle on?

AUNTIE PIE

Not for me. I've just seen the light. *(To Father)* You're as much of a coward as your brother.

MOTHER

Pie, you've got it wrong.

AUNTIE PIE

Duty calls. Back to my pious husband with his flapping hands. But I'll teach him. I'll fix him myself!

She kisses Mother, Margot and finally Thomas.

We won't let them walk all over us, will we, sausage?

She leaves.

FATHER

Don't you have homework to do, Margot?

MARGOT

Yes I do, Pap. But first I'm doing Mamma's hair.

He wants to enforce his will, but can't.

FATHER

I have to finish some work for the office.

He leaves.

SCENE 14

In Mrs. van Amersfoort's house, Thomas returns the book "Alone in the World".

THOMAS

Thank you for lending me the book, Mrs. van Amersfoort.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

You've finished it already?

THOMAS

I read it twice.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I'm impressed. You must be a damn good reader. Oh, how did you like the frogs?

THOMAS

(Smiles) I liked them. But Mamma doesn't want any more plagues.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I can imagine. I just did it for fun. It's actually a pretty bloody clumsy plague, that frog one. *(Aside to audience)* Took us all interval to organize, but we gave it our best shot, didn't we? *(To Thomas)* Hey, listen to this. This is good. You've got a fish tank haven't you?

She takes a new book and reads...

The Guppy by Ogden Nash

Whales have calves,
Cats have kittens,
Bears have cubs,
Bats have bittens,
Swans have cygnets,
Seals have puppies,
But guppies just have little guppies.

How do you like it?

THOMAS

Funny.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I love Ogden Nash. He's very amusing, for an American.

THOMAS

Oh. But what does it mean?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Nothing. It's just fun.

THOMAS

(Doubtful) Oh, I see.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Music doesn't have to mean anything, it's just beautiful. The forest and the beach don't mean anything. Forest is forest and beach is beach. You can just enjoy them can't you?

THOMAS

Yes. We sometimes go to Zandvoort Beach for the day.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

And how is that?

THOMAS

Great.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

And what does Zandvoort Beach mean?

THOMAS

Nothing. It's just great.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Thomas, would you read to me?

THOMAS

Out loud?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Yes.

THOMAS

Here?

She gives him the book.

THOMAS

But this is a children's book.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I know. Begin at the beginning.

Thomas reads, hesitatingly at first, then with more confidence...

THOMAS

The Sniffle by Ogden Nash

In spite of her sniffle
Isabel's chiffle.
Some girls with a sniffle
Would be weepy and tiffle;
They would look awful,
Like a rained-on waffle,
But Isabel's chiffle
In spite of her sniffle...

As he reads on 'sotto voce', Mrs. van Amersfoort really gets into it, laughing loudly and

at times quoting along with him. Actors with two short lengths of rope appear either side of Mrs. van Amersfoort, operating them like plaits attached to the sides of her head.

MARGOT ACTOR

Mrs. van Amersfoort was a witch, but now she was under a spell herself. As Thomas read on, he saw that she wasn't an old lady, but a young girl, her hair in plaits with bows on them. Any minute she could jump up and grab a skipping rope.

THOMAS

Her nose is more red
With a cold in her head,
But then, to be sure,
Her eyes are bluer.
Some girls with a snuffle,
Their tempers are uffle.
But when Isabel's snivelly
She's snivelly civilly,
And when she's snuffly
She's perfectly luffly.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

That was marvellous, Thomas! My husband always used to read aloud to me.
I loved that.

THOMAS

Maybe we could start a Reading Out Loud Club.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Good idea.

THOMAS

With music in between.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

We'd need a program.

THOMAS

And I could recite Psalm 22. I know that off by heart.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me,
and from the words of my roaring?”

O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not
silent.”

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Whacko the diddly-oh! That’s really something. And so nice for children, don’t you
think?

THOMAS

It’s hard to learn it all out of your head.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

I could never do it. But right, we’ve got a Reading Out Loud Club and a program. We’ll
do it here. You read from Ogden Nash and I’ll organize the audience.

THOMAS

Great.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Take the book home, then you can practise.

THOMAS

Whacko the diddly-oh! *He leaves.*

SCENE 15

THOMAS

The Book of Everything. The next day seemed like an ordinary day, but that was because I wasn't paying attention. Good things happened on that day too. Like when I met Eliza in the street.

ELIZA

Hello, Thomas.

THOMAS

Hello, Eliza.

He tries to escape again, as shyness overcomes him, but this time...

ELIZA

Come here, my darling friend.

She hugs him.

THOMAS

Girls are really nice. Maybe Eliza won't be able to get a boyfriend because she's got a leather leg. Maybe she'll wait for me till I'm bigger.

Eliza releases him.

ELIZA

I heard from Mrs. van Amersfoort that you can read aloud really well. I'd love to see that.

She leaves.

THOMAS

I'll wait for you, forever.

He runs back inside.

THOMAS

Hey, Mam.

MOTHER

Hey, my little dreamer. I saw Mrs. van Amersfoort this morning.

Thomas feels for the letter under his shirt.

THOMAS

Oh. Does Pappa know I went back there?

MOTHER

She says you're starting a Reading Out Loud Club. That's nice.

THOMAS

Yes, I have to practise.

MOTHER

You don't want a glass of milk?

THOMAS

No, thanks.

MOTHER

You're becoming such a big grown-up boy these days, aren't you?

THOMAS

Sort of.

MOTHER

My little hero!

She hugs him, then leaves.

Thomas unpins the letter from his shirt.

THOMAS

I'm not a hero, because I'm scared. *(He reads)* "A man who hits his wife dishonours himself."

Margot speaks from the wings.

MARGOT

Pappa has to read this.

THOMAS

I don't like cowards but I am one all the same.

MARGOT

He has to. He really has to.

THOMAS

I'm not brave enough to do what has to be done.

Jesus appears.

JESUS

You are, you know.

THOMAS

Oh Lord Jesus, let this buck pass from me. You said that when you had to die. *(Jesus is about to correct him, then thinks better of it)*. Don't let me be a chicken.

JESUS

Follow me.

Jesus directs him towards the table.

Margot enters and watches.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

The world held its breath.

ELIZA ACTOR

Would Thomas dare to do it?

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

The world didn't know.

Thomas lays the letter in the Bible, shuts it and leaves it on the table.

Margot gives Thomas the 'thumbs up sign'.

So does Jesus, then he leaves.

Margot and Thomas sit at the table.

Sound, or music like a ticking time bomb.

Father enters.

FATHER

I'm home!

He goes through his coat hanging routine, then comes to the table.

Mother enters and they all sit.

FATHER: Let us pray. For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly grateful. Amen.

All mime eating. There is a strong ritualized feeling to what they are doing. The bomb ticks on...

When they finish, Father opens the bible, spots the letter and picks it up.

What's this? (*He reads the letter*) So. Good, I'll read you what it says.

"A man who hits his wife dishonours himself." I agree completely, but there's one thing missing. A man who hits his wife *without reason* dishonours himself.

MARGOT

(*Hums*) Zippety doo dah, zippity ay...

FATHER

Could you turn off that music for a moment, Margot?

MARGOT

Yeah, Pap. Sorry.

FATHER

That letter is not important. What matters is that it seems someone wants to turn us against each other. Someone wants to turn us away from God and His commandments. The question is, who put this letter inside the Bible?

Pause.

Nobody?

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

It was as if all life on earth had died, it was so quiet.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT ACTOR

So quiet the dead awoke in the churchyard.

ELIZA ACTOR

They pricked up their ears, but they heard nothing.

FATHER

Someone at this table is a traitor. I don't know who it is, but nothing is hidden from God. Let us ask for His help.

He prays...

Almighty God, help this family to be strong in these times of temptation...

THOMAS

Jesus?

Jesus appears.

JESUS

I'm here. He means well, I think. But he's scared. He's actually a chicken if you ask me.

THOMAS

I don't know.

JESUS

He's hiding like a scared child behind God's broad back.

FATHER

This we pray in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

JESUS

I'm with you.

Jesus waves.

Thomas waves back.

What are you doing, Thomas?

THOMAS

Waving to Jesus.

Father slams his hand on the bible.

FATHER

I won't put up with this! In my house, no-one makes jokes about our Lord and Saviour!

THOMAS

It wasn't a joke.

FATHER

Do you understand??

THOMAS

Yes, Pappa.

FATHER

And now I want to know who put this letter in the Bible.

MARGOT

I did. (*Hums*) My, oh my, what a wonderful day...!

FATHER

I don't believe a word of it.

Margot shrugs.

Who wrote it then? I don't recognize the handwriting.

MARGOT

Found it in the street. (*Hums*) Plenty of sunshine, heading my way...

FATHER

You're lying. We know very well who put it there.

He looks at Mother.

MOTHER

Yes. I did it.

Thomas springs to his feet.

THOMAS

That's not true! I did it!

FATHER

You are a liar, Thomas.

THOMAS

I did it! I did it! There are holes in the letter – I made them with this safety pin. There!

He throws the pin on the table.

FATHER

It's true. There are holes. You didn't lie, Thomas. I accused you unjustly. Forgive me. But what is more important is that someone has used you. Someone is trying to turn you against your father. Who wrote this letter? Auntie Pie?

THOMAS

That's a secret.

FATHER

Thomas, take the wooden spoon and wait for me upstairs.

Mother stands.

MOTHER

That's not going to happen. Thomas will stay here and you can read from the bible.

AUNTIE PIE ACTOR

A hot wind screamed across the earth. The trees withered and the animals fled.

ELIZA ACTOR

Everything was destroyed and empty. Nothing could live on the earth.

FATHER

Thomas, get the wooden spoon.

MOTHER

No!

MARGOT

(Hums) Mr Bluebird on my shoulder...

THOMAS

I'll get the spoon, Mamma.

MOTHER

My brave hero is staying here.

She puts her arms round Thomas.

FATHER

Don't you contradict me, woman!

THOMAS

Let me go, Mamma.

MOTHER

You don't deserve any punishment.

MARGOT

(Hums) It's the truth, it's actual...

FATHER

Let that child go.

MOTHER

No!

Father approaches her, hand raised.

Margot springs to her feet, kicks a chair over to stop Father's progress, then snatches up the carving knife and points it at Father.

MARGOT

Keep your hands to yourself! I've had enough of this! *(She puts the knife to her throat)*
I've had it up to here!

MOTHER

Margot, put the knife down.

MARGOT

God damn it! Mamma and Thomas needn't be afraid of God, because they are good. You are not good. And don't think I wouldn't dare. I'm like you. I'm not good either.

FATHER

This family is doomed. The times have poisoned you. Let us pray.

He falls to his knees.

MARGOT

I don't give a damn what you believe. But there'll be no more hitting! You know it's wrong, but you do it anyway. As long as the neighbours don't know about it. As long as the rest of the family doesn't notice, or the people at the office don't find out. Am I right? Am I right?

Father struggles to his feet.

FATHER

I can't stay under the same roof as you. I'm going to sleep in a hotel.

He leaves.

Margot puts down the knife and sits at the table, head in her hands.

MARGOT

Zippity doo dah, zippity ay...

MOTHER

What have you done, child?

MARGOT

I've finished it.

She bursts into tears.

MOTHER

You've threatened your father with a knife. What will become of us?

MARGOT

Would you rather get beaten up? Oh yes, I forgot.

She takes the wooden spoon and breaks it savagely and goes to throw it.

MOTHER

Not out the window!

Margot throws the wooden spoon off stage.

Pause.

THOMAS

Pappa was gone for an hour. Then he came back.

Father returns. The family are shocked, but stand together defiantly.

FATHER

I...have work to do for the office.

He slinks past them, and exits.

Transition scene ...Thomas practices his poem...

THOMAS

In spite of her snuffle
Isabel's chiffle.
Some girls with a snuffle
Would be weepy and tiffle...

SCENE 16

Thomas, holding his Ogden Nash book, is in Mrs. van Amersfoort's apartment.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Change of plan, Thomas. We're having the inaugural meeting of the Reading Out Loud Club at your house.

THOMAS

Why?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

We thought it would be nicer – your mother and I and your Auntie Pie. Oh, and we're not doing it on Wednesday afternoon.

THOMAS

(To audience) I felt an upset in my tummy, as if I'd swallowed a hippopotamus.

(To Mrs. Van Amersfoort) When are we doing it then?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

You'll be surprised. Shall I tell you? Here it comes... Tonight.

THOMAS

But what will Pappa say?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Don't be afraid, Thomas. You wanted the plagues of Egypt? Not the frogs, not the flies, not the boils. We're the best plague, we women and children. The Pharaoh can't stand against us.

THOMAS

If you say so.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Shut your eyes, Thomas. Take a deep breath and put your hands in your lap.

Thomas does so.

What do you see?

THOMAS

Nothing...no, wait, I see a desert!

Violin music returns.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

And what do you see in that desert?

THOMAS

Sand.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Nothing else?

THOMAS

If I say you'll think I'm making fun of you.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Just say it.

THOMAS

I see Jesus. Do you mind?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Worse things happen at sea.

Jesus appears.

THOMAS

Jesus always talks to me.

He waves to Jesus, who waves back.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

And is that good or not so good? If you like we can get rid of him.

THOMAS

I don't mind. Jesus is all alone, you know. I don't think he's got anyone else to talk to.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

How sad.

Jesus gestures, as if whispering.

What's he saying now?

THOMAS

He wants to come to the Reading Out Loud Club.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

The more the merrier. Thomas, open your eyes.

Thomas does so.

Are you afraid?

THOMAS

No. Not too much.

Mother calls, causing a snap into the following scene...

SCENE 17

MOTHER

Thomas, put the extra chairs out. Margot, hurry and do those dishes.

MRS VAN AMERFOORT

Whoops! We're in the next scene!

She hurries out as Mother, Margot (now in a party dress) and Thomas run around organizing the room for the Reading Club.

Father enters.

FATHER

What's going on?

MOTHER

We have guests coming. Hurry.

FATHER

What guests?

MARGOT

Auntie Pie...

MOTHER

I still have to get dressed.

FATHER

Just for Auntie Pie?

MOTHER

Of course not, there are lots of other people coming. Maybe you can push the table aside and put the chairs in a circle, Thomas.

FATHER

Who's coming? Why do I only hear about it now?

MARGOT

(Drying the carving knife) Sorry, Pap. We forgot.

MOTHER

It just went right out of my head.

THOMAS

I wanted to tell you, Pappa, but I went to the toilet...and I forgot.

MOTHER

More chairs, Thomas!

THOMAS

How many do we need?

MOTHER

Auntie Magda's coming too, Auntie Bea, Mrs. van Amersfoort, Margot's friends...

MARGOT

...Eliza.

MOTHER

About twelve, I think.

FATHER

Twelve??

MARGOT

She's just saying that. It could be much more.

THOMAS

It's the Reading Out Loud Club – we're doing it every week from now on.

MOTHER

Help Margot with the washing up, Thomas. I really do have to get dressed now.

She leaves.

FATHER

Twelve people?

Mother sings from offstage...

MOTHER (off)

Mr Bluebird on my shoulder,
It's the truth, it's actual
Everything is satisfactual...

FATHER

And what about me? What am I supposed to do this evening?

MOTHER (off)

Will someone put the coffee on?

MARGOT

I will.

The doorbell rings. Thomas opens it, and Eliza enters. She is wearing the same dress she wore in Thomas's vision of her in the castle.

ELIZA

Hello?

Silence in the room, except for the creak of her leather leg. Father stares.

Hey Mr Klopper, it's just my leather leg.

She pulls up her skirt to show it.

Margot returns.

MARGOT

Hi, Eliza. Take a seat, any seat.

ELIZA

I want to sit next to Thomas, because he's my boyfriend.

Violin music starts...She takes his hand in her deformed one, and they link little fingers.

ELIZA

And, how do I look?

THOMAS

Beautiful! Eliza, does your father play the violin?

ELIZA

How do you know that?

THOMAS

And your mother can sing really beautifully.

ELIZA

You're a very special boy, you know.

THOMAS

A bit, maybe.

The doorbell rings. Margot goes to the door and admits Auntie Pie.

MARGOT

Hey, Auntie Pie! Come in.

AUNTIE PIE

I brought some people with me.

She brings a few people from the audience into the space and seats them, inventing names for them as she goes.

AUNTIE PIE

Auntie Magda and Auntie Bea, little Hans and Tineke... and Marleen, Juliet and Anita.
Come in, one and all!

Thomas and Margot join her in bringing audience members to sit in a semi-circle on the stage, creating the impression of a large party.

MOTHER (off)

Leave the front door open. Everybody's welcome!

Auntie Pie spots Father.

AUNTIE PIE

Hey there, Man of God - how do you like my slacks?

She shows them off with a bottom wiggle.

Mrs. van Amersfoort enters with her gramophone.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

You can get away with that, Pie. My bottom's too big for slacks. Hi Thomas, how are you feeling?

THOMAS

Fine.

AUNTIE PIE

I hear Thomas is a great reader now. Have you thought about what you want to be when you grow up, Thomas?

THOMAS

Happy. I want to be happy.

FATHER

Only good-for-nothings and fools are happy, Thomas. Give Auntie Pie a proper answer.

A beat, then...

THOMAS

I want to be happy and that's all.

AUNTIE PIE

A very proper answer if you ask me.

Mother appears. She wears a new dress, her hair hangs loose and she has lipstick on. She looks beautiful.

MOTHER

Is everyone all right for coffee?

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Wow! Don't you look gorgeous, Mrs. Klopper!

Mrs. van Amersfoort consults her program.

Before we start the readings – music! A record from Eliza.

ELIZA

It's Louis Armstrong!

Mrs. van Amersfoort puts the record on the gramophone and Louis Armstrong's trumpet blares out.

MOTHER

I love Louis Armstrong!

ELIZA

So do I. I'll bring more of his records to next week's Reading Out Loud Club.

Thomas picks up the record sleeve.

THOMAS

This is jazz music. I've never seen real live jazz music.

ELIZA

There's so much in the world that we haven't seen. I've never seen a real live Rolls Royce.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Damned good music too, Eliza. It gives me the shivers.

AUNTIE PIE

(Louis Armstrong voice) Where does it give you the shivers, baby?

Mrs. Van Amersfoort shimmies playfully.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

All over!

She and Auntie Pie dance wildly together as all clap and laugh.

Father steps forward and turns the record off.

FATHER

That's enough of this. I have no interest in listening to any heathen Negro music and to stupid empty words. This is my house and...in my house...

Margot stands in front of him, challenging him.

MARGOT

(Sings) Everything is satisfactual...

THOMAS

(to audience) Margot's eyes turned to mirrors. Pappa looked into them and saw himself. Margot was no longer afraid, and before my eyes, I saw her become a witch. But I also saw that Pappa loved her. And that he loved me too, and Mamma...

Mrs. van Amersfoort announces...

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

Reading Out Loud Club item number one will be Thomas reading a verse by Ogden Nash.

Thomas prepares to read.

Father waits uncomfortably. Mother makes a seat ready for him.

MOTHER

(to Father) Come on, Abel. Come and sit with us, love.

Father hesitates. He wants to join them, but he wants to get away too.

Silence. Everybody is watching Father.

MRS VAN AMERSFOORT

That man is scared. He's scared of...people having fun. He's scared someone will say men evolved from apes. Or that the Earth is much more than four thousand years old. Or that someone will ask where Noah got his polar bears from. He's dying on the inside.

MOTHER

(to Father) Come on, Abel. Come and sit with us. Thomas is going to read.

Father pushes past her and leaves the room.

FATHER

I can't. I've got work to do for the office.

He leaves, to go to a corner where he falls to his knees, eyes shut in prayer.

Thomas looks across to him.

THOMAS

(To audience) I felt as if I had swallowed a hippopotamus, and just after that, I realized that what I felt was pity.

I hope that one day, Pappa can sit thinking...by the open window. Not on his knees with his eyes shut.

Jesus appears.

THOMAS

Jesus? Can you help Pappa?

JESUS

I'm afraid not.

THOMAS

Do you think Eliza will wait for me?

JESUS

I think so.

THOMAS

Is it scary when she takes off her leather leg?

JESUS

Worse things happen at sea.

THOMAS

I'm going to marry her, you know.

JESUS

You have my blessing.

THOMAS

In my life I have already seen many things. Some of them frightened me. The Bumbiter, a wooden spoon, a carving knife, Grandpa's false teeth. But some of the things I have seen were beautiful too. One day I'm going to be happy.

(He reads) The Guppy by Ogden Nash

Whales have calves,
Cats have kittens,
Bears have cubs,
Bats have bittens...

JESUS

Thomas will be all right. I could take him into heaven any time, and the angels would be pleased. They all love Thomas. But he wouldn't be interested in my angels. They are all

very beautiful, but none of them has a leather leg that creaks when they walk. Oh well, you can't have everything.

THOMAS

...Swans have cygnets,
Seals have puppies,
But guppies just have little guppies.

It doesn't mean anything. It's just fun.

Mother leads the applause; then she is joined by the other Reading Out Loud Club guests.

Thomas bows.

All rise for curtain call.

END