

# Annie<sup>®</sup>



**A novel based on the beloved musical!**

**Thomas Meehan**

**Tony<sup>®</sup> Award-winning author of  
the smash Broadway hit**





**Thomas Meehan**

PUFFIN BOOKS  
An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA)

PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Group (USA) LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, New York 10014



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia  
New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

[penguin.com](http://penguin.com)

A Penguin Random House Company

First published in the United States of America by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1980  
This edition published by Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2013  
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writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.  
THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE MACMILLAN EDITION AS FOLLOWS:  
Meehan, Thomas.

Annie: an old-fashioned story

Summary: Unexpected sources help a spunky orphan in the  
search for her parents who have been missing since 1922.

[1. Orphans—Fiction. 2. United States—Social life and customs—  
1918–1945—Fiction.] I. Noonan, Julia. II. Title.

PZ4.M4892An 1980 [PS3563.E3] 813'.54 [Fic] 80-16335

Puffin Books ISBN 978-0-698-13947-3

Version\_1

*This book is for my children, Kate and Joe, now all grown up, as well  
as for a pair of little girls, Emma Van Brocklin and Sasha Berman*

## Contents

[Title Page](#)  
[Copyright](#)  
[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Originally, years and years ago, in 1924, Annie came into the world as the eleven-year-old heroine of a comic strip called *Little Orphan Annie*. Created by an Indiana cartoonist and writer named Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie* became immensely popular among America's comic-strip readers and had been appearing in the pages of newspapers all over the United States for forty-eight years when I first found myself involved with it, in 1972, probably way before any of you reading these pages was even born or dreamed of.

Involved with it, that is, when a friend of mine, Martin Charnin, a director and lyricist of Broadway musicals, asked me to collaborate with him in turning *Little Orphan Annie* into a musical for which he'd write the lyrics and I'd write the book, while another friend of his, Charles Strouse, a Tony Award-winning Broadway composer, would provide the music. At the time, I was a writer of comic short stories and articles for a variety of magazines, especially *The New Yorker*, but even though I had been more or less stagestruck all my life, I'd never before written for the theater. So I was both excited and slightly anxious about the prospect of writing the book of the musical we at once decided to simply call *Annie* rather than *Little Orphan Annie*.

I should explain that the so-called book of a musical (also known as the libretto) isn't actually a book like the one you're about to read, at all, but is instead the script of a play—that is, it is the full-length story of the musical told in spoken dialogue, written with blank spaces in each scene where suggested songs and/or dances would later be inserted, like raisins in raisin bread. Upon agreeing to write the book of *Annie*, I first went to the archives of the *New York Daily News*, a paper with offices on East Forty-Second Street that had been featuring *Little Orphan Annie* in its pages since its beginning, and spent several hours on several consecutive days reading all forty-eight years—daily in black-and-white and in color on Sundays—of the comic strip. And guess what? In all of those years of *Little Orphan Annie* I could find no coherent central story that I felt could be the basis of a Broadway musical. Somewhat discouraged, I went back to my partners, Martin and Charles, and told them that three characters were all I had come up with of use to us in creating the musical—the poorest little girl in the world, the richest man in the world, and a dog named Sandy. In short, I told them, I'd have to make up my own story. And I did.

I first decided that the story should take place in New York, which the comic strip didn't, because for us three New Yorkers, it was the city we knew best. In 1972, when I began writing *Annie*, Richard Nixon was president, the nation was mired in the unpopular Vietnam War, and there was a widespread feeling all across the United States that the federal government wasn't much interested in the welfare of the common American people. So, with the 1972 state of the nation in mind, I decided to set *Annie* back in time in another period of deep crisis in the country, the Great Depression in the year 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt first became president. I even also came up with the idea of making Roosevelt a character in the musical.

I'd settled on a place and time in which to set the musical, but what was to be my story? One of my all-time favorite writers has always been Charles Dickens, the brilliant nineteenth-century British author of such classic novels as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Christmas Carol*, to mention but a few of his vastly entertaining and heartrending books. And it struck me that Annie, being a poor and cruelly treated orphan, was a kind of twentieth-century American version of a Dickens character and that I could write a more or less Dickensian book for *Annie*. Dickens was, above all, a master storyteller, and I noted that just about every one of his novels begins with a mystery that is ultimately solved in the last pages of the book. What was my mystery to be? A foundling, a two-month-old infant, Annie, is left on the steps of an orphanage with a broken silver locket around her neck and an unsigned note pinned to her baby blanket saying, "Please take good care of our little darling. Her name is Annie and we love her very much. She was born on October 28th. We will be back to get her soon. We have left half of a locket around her neck and kept the other half so that when we come back for her you will know that she's our baby." That is the mystery with which

*Annie* begins. Who left her at the orphanage? Was it, as Annie grows up to believe, her mother and father? But when are they actually coming back for her? Are they, as Annie asks in song in the opening scene of the musical, “Maybe far away or maybe real nearby”? When we first meet Annie in the show, eleven years have gone by since she was left at the orphanage, and deciding that her mother and father aren’t coming for her after all, she runs away to try to find them on her own. Annie’s quest to find her missing parents and the ultimate solving of the mystery are what form the narrative spine of both the book I wrote for the musical and its later incarnation now as the novel you’re about to read.

When I completed my first draft of the book of the musical and showed it to Martin and Charles, I was delighted that they were basically pleased with it. They had, however, one major problem—it was far too long and would result in a musical that would last for around three and a half hours, whereas the optimal length of a Broadway musical is usually thought to be slightly over two hours. So I set about cutting scene after scene out of *Annie* until I got it down to the proper length. When *Annie* opened on Broadway in the spring of 1977, I’m happy to say that it was a huge hit, winning the Tony Award as the Best Musical of the Year as well as six other Tonys, including one given to a lucky me for Best Book of a Musical. And in the years since 1977, *Annie* has of course been playing in productions not only all over America but also all over the world. But I nonetheless always missed the many scenes I’d had to cut from my original first draft of the musical, and then one day I suddenly shouted to myself, “Eureka, I’ve got it!” If Dickens can write a novel about an orphan boy like *Oliver Twist*, I can write a novel about an orphan girl, Annie, and include in it a narrative version of all the scenes I was forced to cut from the musical. For the first time, the story of Annie as I’d imagined it so many years ago would be told in full! If you’ve seen *Annie* onstage or in one of the movie versions that have been made from the musical, there’s still a lot you’ve never known about Annie. Until now, as you turn the pages to Chapter One. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much I enjoyed writing it. Onward!

Thomas Meehan  
May 27, 2013

# One

**L**ong ago. The still and dark early hours of the morning of the first of January 1933. A light snow was falling in the chill, deserted streets of downtown New York. Time slowly passed, and then the wintry quiet was broken by the clanging of the bells, tolling four a.m., in the steeple of St. Mark's in the Bowery.

A couple of blocks from the church, on St. Mark's Place, in the second-floor dormitory of the New York City Municipal Orphanage, Girls' Annex, an eleven-year-old girl stood alone at a frosty window. Shivering in a thin white cotton nightgown, she listened to the tolling of the bells as she watched the snow swirling downward in the light of a streetlamp. From time to time, she looked yearningly one way up the street and then the other way down. She was waiting for someone to come for her. To take her away from the orphanage. But no one came. Thin, somewhat short for her age, the girl had a slightly upturned nose and an unruly mop of straightish, short-cut red hair. But her most striking features were shining blue-gray eyes that seemed strangely to reflect at the same time a deep sadness, irrepressible joy, and a sharp intelligence. Her name was Annie.

In the cold, drafty dormitory, the other girls—seventeen of them—had long been asleep, mumbling and occasionally crying out in their dreams as they turned restlessly in narrow beds under scratchy, drab army blankets. But Annie had been awake all night. Earlier, trying to fall asleep, she'd been kept awake by the street sounds of New Year's Eve revelers—shouting voices, drunken singing, the honking of car horns, and the raucous blowing of noisemakers. Long after midnight, though, when all had grown quiet on St. Mark's Place and the snow had begun to fall, Annie still hadn't been able to sleep. And at last she'd got up from her bed to stand at the window, to keep a silent vigil through the snowy night, to wait.

For as long as she could remember, Annie hadn't been able to sleep on New Year's Eve. Because New Year's Eve marked the anniversary of the night eleven years earlier, when she'd been left as a two-month-old baby in a tan wicker basket on the front steps of the orphanage. Someone had rung the doorbell and then run off into the night. Annie had been wrapped in a faded pink woolen blanket and had been wearing a broken half of a silver locket around her neck. And there had been an unsigned note pinned to the blanket. "Please take good care of our little darling," the note had read. "Her name is Annie and we love her very much. She was born on October 28th. We

will be back to get her soon. We have left half of a locket around her neck and kept the other half so that when we come back for her you will know that she's our baby."

Because she'd been left at the orphanage on a New Year's Eve, Annie had gotten it into her head that somehow her mother and father would come back to get her on another New Year's Eve. So, each year, while other children counted the days until Christmas, Annie instead counted the days until New Year's Eve. But year after year, she'd been disappointed. Her father and mother hadn't come for her. And now it seemed pretty certain that they weren't coming for her this year, either. As the snow began to fall more heavily now, Annie sighed and rubbed her eyes to keep from crying. "They said they loved me and were comin' back for me—it's in my note," whispered Annie to herself in the dark. "Where are they? Why haven't they come for me?" Annie clasped the broken silver locket that hung around her neck, always, night and day, and squeezed it tightly to her breast.

"Mama, Mama, Mommy!" The littlest of the orphans in the orphanage, six-year-old Molly, had wakened from a nightmare and was crying out for her mother. But Molly's mother had died two years before, in a car accident, and her father had been killed in the same crash. So although she was an extraordinarily beautiful child, Molly was an orphan whom nobody wanted to adopt. An orphan like all of the other girls in the orphanage. Except Annie. Annie was different because *she* had a father and a mother. Somewhere. "Mama, Mommy!" cried Molly again, waking up the girls in the beds around her.

"Shut up," shouted Pepper from the next bed.

"Yeah, can't nobody get any sleep around here," grumbled Duffy.

"Mama, Mommy!" screamed Molly again.

"I said, shut your little trap, Molly," said Pepper, getting angrily out of bed, picking Molly up, and shoving her down on the floor. At fourteen, Pepper was the oldest and the biggest of the orphans, a pug-nosed rascal with a face full of freckles and long, tousled hair that was even redder than Annie's.

"Ahhh, stop pushin' the poor little kid around," said July. "She ain't done nothin' to you." Twelve years old, the sweetest of the orphans—if not exactly the prettiest—July had received her name because, simply enough, she'd been abandoned as a baby at the orphanage on the Fourth of July.

"She's keepin' me awake, ain't she," Pepper snapped back at July.

"No, *you* are keepin' *us* awake," said July.

"You wanna make somethin' out of it?" said Pepper, walking over to July's bed.

"Oh, the Jack Dempsey of the orphanage," said July, and in a moment she and Pepper were rolling on the floor in a shrieking, punching, hair-pulling fight that woke up eight-year-old Tessie in her bed at the far end of the dormitory.

"Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness, they're fightin' and I won't get no sleep all night," whined Tessie, a pale, frightened girl with blonde pigtails, a thin beaked nose, and scarcely any chin at all. "Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness!"

Annie had been silently watching from the window. But now she stepped forward and broke up the fight between Pepper and July. "C'mon, you two, cut it out and go back to bed," commanded Annie, pulling the fighting girls apart.

"Aw, nuts to you, Annie," muttered Pepper, glowering as she stomped back to her bed. But Pepper didn't try to pick a fight with Annie. Although she was a good deal

smaller than Pepper, Annie was recognized by all the orphans as the toughest among them. Even Pepper was afraid of her. The smartest of the orphans, too, and their acknowledged leader, especially in their never-ending battles with the headmistress of the orphanage, Miss Agatha Hannigan.

“Pepper started it, Annie,” said July, “pushin’ Molly down.”

“I know,” said Annie, patting July on the shoulder. “But you gotta go back to sleep, all of you.”

“Okay, Annie,” said July, climbing back into her bed as Annie went to comfort Molly, who was still crouched on the floor. Kneeling beside Molly, Annie pulled the child into her arms.

“It’s all right, Molly, Annie’s here,” said Annie, gently stroking Molly’s long, black hair.

“It was my mama, Annie,” said Molly, tears streaming down her flushed cheeks. “We was ridin’ on the ferryboat and she was holdin’ me up to see all the big ships. And then she was walkin’ away, wavin’, and I couldn’t find her no more. Anywhere.”

“It was only a dream, honey,” said Annie, drying Molly’s eyes with the sleeve of her nightgown. “Now, you gotta get back to sleep. It’s after four o’clock.”

“Annie,” said Molly, “read me your note.”

“Again?” said Annie.

“*Please*,” said Molly.

“Okay, Molly,” said Annie, and from the battered wicker basket under her bed—the same basket in which she’d been left at the orphanage and in which she kept her few belongings—Annie took out the note and started to read it aloud by the pale light that slanted in from the streetlamp outside. Annie had folded and unfolded the note so many times that it was nearly falling apart. It was written in a round, feminine hand on a square of pale-blue cardboard. “Please take good care of our little darling,” Annie began. “Her name is . . .”

“Oh, no, here it comes again,” groaned Pepper. In the years that they’d been together in the orphanage, Annie had read her note aloud to the orphans an average of perhaps two or three times a week. “Her name is Annie,” said Duffy in a mocking, singsong voice. A tubby thirteen-year-old with a pudding face and scraggly blonde hair, Duffy was Pepper’s best friend. “She was born on October twenty-eighth,” Duffy went on. “We will be back to get her soon.” And now all the orphans began laughing at Duffy’s rendition of the note. All, that is, but Molly and Tessie. “Oh, my goodness, now they’re laughin’ and I won’t get no sleep at night,” whined Tessie. “Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness.”

Annie angrily stood up, put her hands on her hips, and faced the laughing girls. “All right,” said Annie, “do you wanna sleep with your teeth inside your mouth or out?” Silence. Everyone, including Pepper, lay quietly back down in bed. Annie finished reading the note and then, folding it with great care, put it back in her basket. Now Annie picked Molly up and carried her to bed. She tucked the little girl in under the covers and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“Good night, Molly,” whispered Annie.

“Good night, Annie,” said Molly. “You’re lucky, Annie, I dream about havin’ a mother and father. But you really got ’em.”

“I know,” said Annie softly. “Somewhere. Some-where.” In a few minutes, Molly

and the other orphans had fallen back to sleep. But Annie still couldn't sleep. And she went again to the window to look out on the falling snow. At the window, she drifted into a waking dream about her father and mother. They were maybe real nearby, she thought, or maybe far away. Her father, she knew, was a big, strapping man who laughed and smiled all the time, and who'd pick her up in his arms, give her a big bear hug, and whirl her about the room. He was a lawyer, or maybe even a doctor, who helped poor people. And her mother was a kind, gentle woman with golden-blond hair who played songs on the piano and sewed even better than a professional dressmaker. She'd made dozens of beautiful dresses for Annie. The dresses, all the colors of the rainbow, were hanging in a closet, waiting for the day when Annie came home. Annie and her parents lived in the country, in a vine-covered house on a hill. There was a broad front lawn, and from the porch, you could see for miles across green meadows to a distant winding river. On summer afternoons, Annie, her mother, and her father, the three of them together, would walk across the meadows to the river and have a picnic of deviled eggs and lemonade while they watched swans gliding by. In her room in the house, Annie had a canopy bed and a three-story dollhouse and a red-and-white hobbyhorse and . . . A horse-drawn milk wagon came clattering around the corner of St. Mark's Place, waking Annie with a start from her reverie. She'd heard the sound of the milk wagon outside the window in the early morning ever since she could remember. Annie began thinking back now on all of her long years in the orphanage. And almost none of her memories of those years were happy ones.

## Two

**A**nnie's earliest memory, from a time when she was perhaps two or three years old, was of the shadowy figure of Miss Hannigan looming menacingly above her as she played with a tattered rag doll on the floor of the dormitory. "Get up from there, you wretched little orphan—you've got that clean dress all filthy," shrieked Miss Hannigan, a skinny, hatchet-faced woman with short, jet-black hair. She reminded the orphans of a particularly unpleasant-looking—and all too real—Halloween witch. Miss Hannigan had yanked Annie to her feet and given her a dozen whacks across the backside with a heavy oaken paddle. But Annie hadn't cried. Even as a tiny tot, Annie had never cried when Miss Hannigan beat her, a show of spirit that infuriated Miss Hannigan.

Because Annie was at once the spunkiest and the most intelligent of the girls in the orphanage, Miss Hannigan hated her more than any child she'd had under her charge in all her twenty-three years as headmistress of the orphanage. "I'll break that little brat yet," muttered Miss Hannigan to herself, and she constantly gave Annie extra chores to do—greasy pots and pans to wash in the orphanage's steamy basement kitchen, grimy windows to wash, floors to scrub on her hands and knees. But Annie never let her spirits flag and made Miss Hannigan all the angrier by taking on each new task with a cheery smile—the worse the chore, the broader Annie's smile. "You see, it's me against Miss Hannigan, like a war," Annie told the other orphans, "and I'm not gonna give in to her, ever."

As the years passed, Annie grew accustomed to the routine of life in the orphanage. Each morning, at six a.m., the piercing whistle woke the slumbering orphans. "All right, get up, get up, all of you, you rotten orphans!" shouted Miss Hannigan. A cold shower, and then the girls dressed themselves in hand-me-downs that came twice a year in large bundles from the Salvation Army. Their beds made and the dormitory swept, the orphans were marched downstairs to the first-floor dining room for breakfast. "No talking!" snapped Miss Hannigan. The girls sat silently on hard wooden benches at a long trestle table as Miss Hannigan served up breakfast. For as far back as Annie could remember, breakfast in the orphanage had always been the same—a glass of bluish skim milk and a bowl of hot mush. The mush, which was prepared by Miss Hannigan herself, was mouse-gray in color and lumpy in texture, and it tasted the way that white school paste smelled. When they'd first come to the orphanage, many of the

girls had gagged on Miss Hannigan's mush and hadn't been able to swallow so much as a spoonful. But, after a time, they'd grown used to it. Because for breakfast, in the orphanage, it was mush or nothing.

After breakfast, the schedule in the orphanage varied according to whether or not it was a school day. If there was school, Miss Hannigan marched the orphans down the block to P.S. 62, a turreted Victorian redbrick public school at the corner of St. Mark's Place and Third Avenue. The orphans stayed in school until four o'clock, when Miss Hannigan picked them up and herded them back to the orphanage. If there was no school, the orphans went downstairs immediately after breakfast to their basement workroom, where they sat at rows of sewing machines making little girls' dresses. On their working days, the orphans sewed for eight hours, with twenty minutes out for lunch (another glass of skim milk and a sandwich of fatty ham or bologna). Each girl was expected by the end of the day to have finished at least one dress. Or else she got the paddle from Miss Hannigan. The dresses that they made—frilly party frocks of organdy and chiffon in bright colors, like canary yellow and magenta—were in marked contrast to the drab and patched hand-me-downs that they wore. Miss Hannigan had arranged for a children's clothing manufacturer in Brooklyn to provide the sewing machines and the raw fabrics in exchange for being able to buy the finished dresses at fifty cents apiece. Most weeks Miss Hannigan made as much as thirty dollars for herself from the orphans' labors. The orphans weren't supposed to work, of course, and if the director of the New York City Board of Orphans, Mr. Joseph Donatelli, had known what Miss Hannigan was up to, he would quickly have fired her. But no one had come from the Board of Orphans to inspect the girls' annex on St. Mark's Place for more than a dozen years. And Miss Hannigan justified what she was doing by telling herself that she was teaching the orphans a useful trade. "You oughta be grateful to me, you little brats—you'll be able to get a job sewin' when you grow up and gotta leave here," Miss Hannigan told the orphans as they bent hour after hour over their sewing machines in the dank basement workshop.

Miss Hannigan spent most of the money she made from selling the dresses on bottles of bootleg whiskey. For Miss Hannigan was a heavy drinker who was slightly drunk from morning until night. While the orphans were either working at their sewing machines or off at school, Miss Hannigan idled away most of her days in her high-ceilinged office sipping rye whiskey, smoking Lucky Strike cigarettes, and listening to soap operas like *Ma Perkins* and *The Romance of Helen Trent* on her table-model Philco radio.

At six o'clock each evening, the orphans filed into the dining room for supper, a meal that most often consisted of boiled chicken wings, grayish boiled potatoes, and some such soggy vegetable as boiled cabbage or broccoli. There was spongy white bread and margarine to fill up on, but dessert was served only on special occasions like Thanksgiving or Christmas, when each orphan got a bowl of gummy rice pudding. After supper, the orphans were sent upstairs to their dormitory for a period of study until bedtime. Lights out at eight o'clock, and another day in the orphanage was done.

Sunday was the only day of rest for the orphans. But, in a way, Sunday was the worst day of all for them. Miss Hannigan led the girls to St. Mark's in the Bowery each Sunday morning at eight o'clock, and they sat for more than an hour in the musty church listening to long-winded sermons about the ultimate fate of all who sinned—

the eternal fires of hell. And, of course, as Miss Hannigan explained to them, an orphaned girl was by nature a sinner. Or why else would her mother and father have died on her? Racked by confused feelings of guilt, fear, and boredom, the orphans were paraded from the church back to the orphanage, where Miss Hannigan made them spend the day praying and reflecting on the evil they had done in the past week. “Cleanse your filthy souls with remorse and beg God for forgiveness for your multitude of sins!” thundered Miss Hannigan at the frightened orphans. No talking. No reading. Only sitting silently with bowed heads and folded hands for endless hours at the trestle table in the airless dining room. There were Sunday afternoons in the orphanage, Annie remembered now as she stood at the window looking out on the falling snow, that had seemed to last forever.

School days were happier for Annie than the days spent at her sewing machine. But not much happier. Still, at school she had a chance to read, which was her favorite pastime. Annie eagerly read her way through scores of books each year. The books she loved best, like the Five Little Peppers series, were about poor but happy children and cheerful families. And she also loved adventure books that were set in romantic, faraway places, like the South Sea islands. Annie did well in school, getting good marks in every subject and ranking near the top of her class. But the orphans, including Annie, were constantly teased and ridiculed by the other schoolchildren, because of their raggedy clothes and because they didn’t have mothers, fathers, or homes of their own. As they were herded to and from school by Miss Hannigan, the orphans were mocked by the other children, who taunted them with a crude rhyme they’d invented:

Orphan, orphan, ha, ha, ha,  
Ain’t got a mama, ain’t got a pa,  
Orphan, orphan, dumb, dumb, dumb,  
Lookin’ like a pig, dressed like a bum!

In winter, the other children sometimes made a game out of seeing how many orphans they could hit with snowballs. And Miss Hannigan didn’t allow the orphans to step out of line to throw snowballs back. Teeth clenched, eyes forward, the orphans trudged two by two along the slushy city sidewalk through a gauntlet of cruelly laughing children and flying snowballs.

The teachers at P.S. 62 weren’t at all kind to the orphans, either. In each class, the orphans were assigned to a special section of desks at the back of the room and treated by their teachers as pesky nuisances who didn’t really belong in school. Annie remembered having overheard her fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Conklin, talking one day to another teacher. “Damn orphans, cluttering up our classrooms,” Mrs. Conklin had complained. “Without them this job would be easy.”

At lunchtime, as though they had some terrible disease that the other children might catch, the orphans were put in a special corner section of the school cafeteria. They ate some such sodden glop as baked macaroni and cheese that was provided free to needy students by the New York City Board of Education, while the rest of the children, who’d brought their lunches in shiny metal lunchboxes, had meals that their mothers had fixed for them—mysterious and wonderful things that the orphans yearningly

dreamed of tasting, like peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, bananas, chocolate brownies, and hot cocoa poured from thermos bottles.

During the half-hour morning and afternoon recess periods, on the fenced-in concrete playground behind the school, the orphans, left out of the other children's games, banded together to play games of their own. And to protect themselves against the playground bullies, who from time to time decided that it would be fun to beat up an orphan. Against these bullies, the orphans, led by Annie and Pepper, put up a united front. "You touch any one of us," said Annie fiercely, "and all of us will jump you!" At home, in the orphanage, the orphans often fought and bickered with one another, but at school they stuck loyally together. And the bullies at P.S. 62 soon learned that it didn't pay to take on the orphans, unless they were looking for a couple of black eyes. They particularly learned not to get mixed up in a fight with Annie, who could flatten even the biggest and the toughest-looking of the boys with a single punch. So, after a while, the orphans were left alone during recess to play their own games of tag or hopscotch.

After reading, Annie's favorite subject was geography. She loved learning about parts of the world that were as totally different and as far distant as possible from P.S. 62, the orphanage, and St. Mark's Place. The country that she loved studying about most of all was Switzerland, with its sparkling-clear lakes and green meadows, and towering snow-capped mountains. She often daydreamed that her father and mother would turn out to be living in Switzerland, and that she'd soon be going to stay with them, forever, in a mountainside Swiss chalet, like a little girl named Heidi whom she'd read about in a book. But as she thought now at the window about geography, Annie remembered something that had happened the previous year at school, when she'd been in the fifth grade. It was one of the most painful memories of her life.

## Three

One Monday morning in early May, her teacher, Mrs. Conklin, had arrived in class with a beautifully illustrated 375-page Rand McNally atlas. The book, Mrs. Conklin announced, would be awarded on the final day of school, June 23rd, to the fifth-grade pupil who won a special geography spelling bee to be held on the morning of that day. The students, said Mrs. Conklin, would be expected to name and to spell correctly all forty-eight states of the United States as well as their capital cities. “For example,” said Mrs. Conklin, a gray-haired, stern-faced woman who wore steel-rimmed spectacles, “The first state of the union, in alphabetical order, is Alabama, capital A-l-a-b-a-m-a, Alabama, and its capital is Montgomery, capital M-o-n-t-g-o-m-e-r-y, Montgomery. One spelling mistake and a pupil will be eliminated from the spelling bee. We will continue until only one pupil is left, and he or she will be the winner of the atlas.”

Suddenly, Annie wanted more than anything else in the world to win the Rand McNally atlas. For it struck her that if her mother and father didn't come for her soon, she might have to go out into the world to look for them. And she could use the atlas, with its colored maps of all the states and every country on earth, to help her find them. Annie didn't know exactly how the atlas could help her find her parents, but it would surely, she felt, in some magical way, lead her to them. And so, in the weeks that followed, Annie spent every moment she could spare learning the names of the states and their capitals and memorizing their spellings. At the orphanage, in the period each evening between supper and bedtime, she'd have her best pal, Kate, who was nine, sit with a geography book and read off the states to her. “Mississippi,” Kate would say. “Mississippi, capital M-i-double-s-i-double-s-i-double-p-i, Mississippi,” Annie would reply. “And the capital of Mississippi is Jackson, capital J-a-c-k-s-o-n, Jackson.” On and on Annie and Kate would go until they'd gotten through all forty-eight states. All the orphans were rooting for Annie to win the atlas. Except Pepper. “For crumb's sake, Annie, you're drivin' us nuts with all of that spellin' every night,” Pepper grumbled. “Who cares whether you win any dumb atlas or not?” But Annie ignored Pepper. After lights-out, lying in her narrow bed, she kept on spelling to herself, finally dozing off at around ten o'clock while she tried to remember, for example, how to spell the capital of Florida, Talahasee, or was it Tallahasee? Tallahassee?

The day of the spelling bee at last arrived. Annie marched off to P.S. 62 with the other orphans that morning, confident that there wasn't a state or a capital city in the United States that she didn't know how to spell. As Annie figured it, her main competitors in the spelling contest would be Philip Bissell, a pale, puny bookworm and the smartest boy in the class, and Myrtle Vandenmeer. Green-eyed and blonde, with an upturned nose and glittery braces on her teeth, Myrtle was the richest and smartest girl in Annie's class. Her father was a dentist who everybody said made twelve thousand dollars a year! Myrtle lived with her parents on St. Mark's Place, in a four-story brownstone house that they had all to themselves. Myrtle had her own bedroom in the house, as well as a top-floor playroom filled with dolls and dollhouses and a stuffed life-size lamb from France. She wore expensive dresses, which her mother bought for her at Bergdorf Goodman's, on Fifth Avenue, and she went on vacations with her parents each summer to someplace called Cape Cod. Myrtle was the leader of a pack of fifth-grade girls whose favorite sport was making fun of the orphans. Making fun especially of Annie.

The greatest source of humiliation for Annie at school was the fact that she was the only child who didn't have a last name. Even the other orphans, like Pepper and Molly and Duffy, had arrived at the orphanage with last names of their own, but there had been no mention of a last name in Annie's note. So, to her vast embarrassment, Annie was known both at the orphanage and at school simply as Annie Orphan. From their earliest days in school together, when they'd had Miss Kniss for kindergarten, Myrtle had made fun of Annie for having no last name. "Oh, look who's here—Annie Orphan, Little Orphan Annie, hasn't got no Mammy!" If Annie ran after her, Myrtle would go crying to Miss Kniss, saying, "Teacher, teacher, Annie Orphan tried to hit me again!" And as often as not, it was Annie who would end up in trouble, sent to the principal's office and made to do hours of extra homework because she'd "bullied" Myrtle. Meanwhile, Myrtle, who behaved like a perfect little blonde angel whenever any of the teachers were around, reigned each year as teacher's pet. If I'm going to lose the spelling bee to anybody, thought Annie that morning, please, God, don't let it be to Myrtle Vandenmeer.

The spelling bee went just about the way that Annie had figured it would. The dimmer-witted children in the class were quickly eliminated, stumbling on the spelling of states like Missouri or capital cities like Sacramento, and within a few minutes only five students were left in the spelling bee—Tommy Warbrick, Margaret McManiss, Philip Bissell, Myrtle, and Annie. In the third round, Tommy lost out when he misspelled Frankfort, Kentucky, and Margaret soon followed him by forgetting that the capital of New Hampshire is Concord. For a long time, as Annie dug her nails into her palms to contain her nervousness and excitement, each of the three remaining contestants—Philip, Myrtle, and Annie—went on without making a mistake, correctly spelling such tough states as Mississippi and capitals as Annapolis. But then Philip misspelled Montpelier, Vermont, and suddenly only Myrtle and Annie were left in the contest.

The two girls stood alone at the front of the classroom as Mrs. Conklin, with a geography book open before her, sat at her desk calling out names in a false, ringing voice. It seemed to Annie that she was given the more difficult states to spell, like Minnesota and Massachusetts, while Myrtle was given states like Texas and Ohio. But

neither girl made a mistake as state after state went by, and it began to look as if the spelling bee might end in a two-way tie. But then Myrtle was given Florida. “Florida, capital F-l-o-r-i-d-a, Florida,” enunciated Myrtle in her singsong, stuck-up voice, clearly confident that she was going to win the contest. “And the capital of Florida is Tallahassee, capital T-a-l-l-a-h-a-s-e-e, Tallahassee.”

Mrs. Conklin’s pale face suddenly turned red with fury, for she now had to face the inarguable fact that Myrtle—the brilliant, rich Myrtle Vandenmeer—had misspelled Tallahassee. “I’m sorry, Myrtle, but that is incorrect,” said Mrs. Conklin through gritted teeth. “You may return to your seat.” Myrtle stared at the teacher with utter disbelief, and then rage took over. “It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair, Annie cheated!” snarled Myrtle, stomping angrily back to her seat and kicking her chair with her expensive little Mary Jane shoes before sitting down.

Now, her heart pounding with unaccustomed joy, Annie stood alone at the front of the class. “Does this mean I win?” she asked Mrs. Conklin. “No, you do not win unless you can correctly spell the capital city that Myrtle was unable to spell,” said Mrs. Conklin after a moment of hesitation. She’d quickly changed the rules in the hope that the contest might at least end up in a tie between Myrtle and Annie. “Spell Tallahassee.”

Annie closed her eyes and tried to remember how the city had been spelled in her geography book. It had always been the most difficult one of all for her to remember. “Tallahassee,” said Annie, “capital T-a-l-l-a-h-a”—she paused for a moment and took a deep breath— “s-s-e-e, Tallahassee.” Mrs. Conklin glared at Annie with undisguised hatred in her cold, slate-blue eyes. “Correct,” she said with difficulty. Annie broke out in an enormous grin—this was the best she’d ever felt under the roof of P.S. 62—as her fellow orphans in the class, including even Pepper and Duffy, let out whoops of delight. “Silence!” snapped Mrs. Conklin.

“Do I get my atlas now?” Annie asked.

“No, the atlas will be awarded during the All-School Assembly,” said Mrs. Conklin. “Now return to your place.” Annie walked in a daze of triumph to her seat at the back of the room, passing Myrtle, who hissed, “Dumb orphan, you were just lucky.” But Annie didn’t care now what mean things Myrtle had to say to her—she’d won the Rand McNally atlas!

Every year, on the last day of school at P.S. 62, parents were invited to an All-School Assembly in the auditorium, where awards were handed out to pupils who’d won special honors. This year every seat in the auditorium was taken, and in the first row, haughtily arranging themselves in their seats, sat Myrtle’s father and mother, Dr. and Mrs. Vandenmeer. Up on the stage, the school’s principal, Mr. Drennen, led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance; the sixth-grade chorus sweetly sang “America the Beautiful,” off-key; and then the passing out of the awards began. Her heart racing a million miles a second, Annie could hardly wait for her turn to go up on the stage to receive her award. More than a dozen books and certificates and medals were handed out before Mr. Drennen called on Mrs. Conklin to present the fifth-grade geography spelling bee award. Mrs. Conklin bustled onto the stage and stepped to the speakers’ podium, carrying the Rand McNally atlas, its glossy cover seeming to Annie almost to shine. “The winner of the fifth-grade geography spelling bee,” called out Mrs. Conklin in a loud, official voice, “who receives this handsome Rand McNally atlas for her

achievement, is . . . Myrtle Vandenmeer.”

Annie sat stunned with disbelief—she felt as if she’d been hit very hard in the stomach—as the parents loudly applauded and Myrtle marched mincingly up onto the stage from her seat to get the award. Suddenly, Pepper was standing on her feet in the middle of the auditorium. “Hey, that ain’t fair. Myrtle didn’t win the spelling bee, Annie did!” shouted Pepper. “Silence that child!” called out Mr. Drennen, and a pair of teachers quickly collared Pepper and dragged her out of the auditorium as she still shouted, “It ain’t fair, it ain’t fair!” Annie herself sat quietly, swallowing, gritting her teeth, looking upward but not crying—she wouldn’t give Myrtle or Mrs. Conklin the satisfaction of seeing her burst into tears. But inside she thought her heart would break as she watched Myrtle come down from the stage with the atlas and go to her beaming parents to be kissed and hugged.

When the assembly was over, Annie walked up to Mrs. Conklin by the water fountain in the hallway. “Mrs. Conklin, that wasn’t fair—you know that I won the spelling bee and should’ve gotten the atlas,” said Annie. She knew that if she got angry it would be easier not to cry. Mrs. Conklin looked icily down at her. “Orphans are not eligible to receive awards on occasions when parents are in attendance,” declared Mrs. Conklin, turning on her heel and walking away. And then Myrtle Vandenmeer strolled by, between her parents, with the Rand McNally atlas clutched in her arms. “Nah, nah, nah, dumb orphan,” said Myrtle, sticking out her tongue at Annie. Annie said nothing.

Later, Annie remembered the day that she didn’t get the atlas as maybe the saddest and most bitter of her entire life up to then. But most of her other memories were sad, too. At the window, she thought now about the Christmas that had just passed. A few days before Christmas, little Molly had stepped up to Miss Hannigan and asked, “Miss Hannigan, is there a Santa Claus?” Miss Hannigan had glowered at Molly for a moment, and then she’d smiled and gently replied, “Yes, dear, of course there’s a Santa Claus.” Molly’s face broke into a happy smile. “But,” added Miss Hannigan with a cruel, cackling laugh, “he don’t come to rotten little orphans like you!” “Oh,” said Molly, “then what are we gonna get for Christmas?” “What did you get last year,” asked Miss Hannigan. “Nothin’,” said Molly. “Well, you’re gettin’ it again,” cackled Miss Hannigan.

And indeed the girls in the orphanage had once again this year received no Christmas presents other than what they’d given to one another. On Christmas morning, for example, Annie had given Kate a wire hanger that she’d bent into the outline of a Christmas angel, and Pepper had given Molly a pocket comb. “Gee, thanks, Pepper, an Ace comb—that’s the best kind, with only two teeth missing,” Molly said gratefully. “Hey, let me see that comb, that’s mine!” screamed Duffy. “You dirty rat, Pepper, you swiped it from me!”

“Ah, shut your trap, Duffy,” snarled Pepper, and the two girls had gotten into a hair-pulling fight. Later, Molly had offered to give back the stolen comb, but Duffy had shrugged and told her to keep it. “That’s okay, kid, it’s your Christmas present—from me . . . and Pepper,” said Duffy. And so another Christmas had passed at the orphanage without a tree, store-bought presents, or a visit from Santa Claus.

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Annie suddenly realized that she'd been standing all night at the window. As the snow continued to fall, a faint light was beginning to show in the sky above St. Mark's Place. It was the first day of the new year, 1933, a time when most people were looking ahead with hope to the coming months. But Annie had nothing to look ahead to but a continued life of drudgery under the iron fist of Miss Hannigan. When she reached the age of sixteen, Annie would be released from the orphanage to go out into the world on her own. But she wouldn't be sixteen for another five years. Five more years in the orphanage. Annie thought about something Pepper had said a few days earlier when she'd been talking about how her parents would soon be coming to take her home. "You dumb cluck," said Pepper, "your parents are never comin' for you." And Annie knew now that Pepper had been right. If her father and mother hadn't turned up at the orphanage after all these years, she had to face the fact that they weren't ever coming for her. Not ever. And so she'd have to go find *them*. "That's it," whispered Annie determinedly to herself. "I've got to go find them, get out of here—run away." Yes, she decided, I'm going to run away! When? Right now!