

A Readers' Theater Adaptation of Maureen Sherry's

Walls Within Walls

By Brooke King

Readers:

Narrator 1	Narrator 2	Narrator 3	Bruce Smithfork
Mrs. Smithfork	Eloise Munn	Annika	Maricel
CJ Smithfork	Brid Smithfork	Patrick Smithfork	Carron Smithfork

Ray (nonspeaking part)

Narrator 1: The Smithfork children are hanging out in CJ's room. Brid is sprawled on the bed reading Mr. Post's book of poems, taking notes, and looking for clues.

Narrator 2: Patrick was quietly playing with Legos on the floor when he looked up at the back cover of the book Brid was reading and noticed a strange inky blob smeared across the middle of the brown leather. The more he stared at it, the more he saw something.

Patrick: Is that book about...um...?

Brid: What?

Patrick: I think this book is about dying 'cause his book says 'death' on the back.

Brid: Patrick, what are you babbling about?

CJ: Pat, can we stay on topic here? We're talking about Grant's Tomb.

Patrick: That inky blob. It says something about death. Look at the back of the book.

Brid: This thing? It's a blob of ink.

Patrick: No, you're not holding it the right way now.

Narrator 3: Patrick climbed onto the bed and adjusted the book, holding it at arm's length. Brid and CJ saw one long, stretched word, only recognizable to someone looking carefully at the right level.

CJ: Holy mother of a llama!

Brid: What is that word?

Patrick: It's talking about death.

CJ: No. Well, almost. It doesn't say D-E-A-T-H; it says H-E-A-R-T-H.

Patrick: Hearth? What does hearth mean?

CJ: In a fireplace – it's the open spot in a wall at the base of a chimney.

Brid: This apartment is full of chimneys! We have three of them. I bet something is hidden in the hearths!

Narrator 1: CJ snatched the book from Brid, ignoring the little dance she and Patrick were doing. He recited the first two lines of "Ulysses."

CJ: It little profits that an idle king, By this still hearth, among these barren crags...

Brid: I get it! It's the second time Post is leading us to a hearth! But which one?

Narrator 2: She slammed CJ's door open and took off down the hallway. CJ and Patrick followed her into the living room, where Brid ducked inside the enormous limestone fireplace.

Maricel: What's going on here?

Narrator 3: The nanny's shrill voice surprised everyone.

CJ: We are looking at tiles.

Maricel: Oh, are your parents going to change the tiles?

CJ: No, we're just interested in, um, the tiling. I mean, the hearth is really nice, and we're just admiring it.

Narrator 1: At that moment, they were mercifully interrupted by the sound of the elevator. In sauntered Bruce Smithfork much earlier than expected.

Bruce: What are you up to? Looking for Santa?

Narrator 2: None of the children knew how to answer.

Brid: So, Dad, how'd you get out of work so early?

Bruce: I thought I'd come home early because school starts tomorrow.

Brid: Dad, school doesn't start until the seventh, and today is just the second.

Bruce: I knew that... Want to throw the football around?

Patrick: Dad, didn't you notice it is raining?

Bruce: I didn't mean football in the park. I meant living room football. They don't call this a ballroom for nothing!

Narrator 3: He winked, and CJ thought he hadn't seen his dad do that in a really long time.

Narrator 1: Three minutes later, they were passing the football around. Maricel, the nanny, had carried off Carron for a bath.

Narrator 2: With its twenty-foot ceilings and rectangular shape, the living room was the perfect miniature football field. CJ moved the two long couches against the walls, making end zones. Brid stuck brooms and mops deep in the cushions so they stood upright, creating goalposts.

Patrick: Hike!

Narrator 3: The teams were Mr. Smithfork and Patrick versus CJ and Brid. Soon both sides were in a sweaty rumble.

CJ: Dad, do you know who lived here before us?

Bruce: Nope. They were renters, not owners. We bought the apartment from people we never met. We really liked the apartment because it had so much character. It seemed like the walls had stories to tell us, stories from a different time.

Narrator 1: CJ and Brid looked at each other.

Bruce: Go long, Pat!

CJ: But the original owner died a long time ago, right?

Bruce: That's right. He died and left the original apartment to his family, and they divided it up into four different apartments. They all came up for sale after the Great Depression, when it was hard to sell any apartment, never mind one with bizarre rules attached. The fact that not only the owner, but any owner in the future, had to agree to not wreck the walls made it a bit of a white elephant.

Brid: A what?

CJ: An expensive possession that is a financial burden to maintain. It's just an expression.

Narrator 2: Just then Maricel returned with Carron. She looked alarmed at the football game.

Carron: We pay you? (baby voice)

Bruce: Of course you can play with us.

Maricel: She just had her bath. She shouldn't get dirty now. Playtime is done for the day.

Bruce: Living room football is very clean.

Narrator 3: Maricel gathered her purse and rang the elevator button.

Maricel: Good night. (with an edge to her voice)

Narrator 1: The football game continued with loud laughter and furniture falling over backwards.

Narrator 2: When the elevator arrived, they were surprised to see Ray, the doorman, accompanied by two women. One wore a white blouse, a dark skirt, a strand of pearls, and sensible pumps. She looked around eighty years old. The other wore the "Fifth Avenue uniform" – a simple gray dress with a white apron across the front. This was the dress of the helpers: dog walkers, nannies, maids, and the ladies hired to buy groceries.

[Ray holds the elevator door open while the women exit.]

Narrator 3: The older woman stood with her mouth opened, staring at the overturned couch and Mr. Smithfork with a tie around his head. Maricel shrugged and stepped onto the elevator, leaving the two strange women with the Smithforks.

Bruce: May I help you?

Narrator 1: Brid stared at the older lady. Something about her seemed familiar. Brid watched the woman's eyes sweep the room. For a flash, Brid thought she saw a half smile.

Eloise: Yes, hello. I'm your downstairs neighbor, and this is my housekeeper, Annika. We were just making sure a bomb hadn't exploded up here.

Annika: I think Madam would like to request quieter behavior. Madam's apartment has very high ceilings, so the noise you make here is amplified downstairs.

Mrs. Smithfork: Dinner!

Bruce: Oh, yes. Please, ladies, we are sorry about the noise. We didn't want to play outside in the rain.

Brid: Yeah, we kind of take the word ballroom literally.

Narrator 2: The elderly woman cracked a full smile at Brid's joke. She seemed apologetic.

Patrick: Want to stay for dinner? My mom makes the best chocolate cake!

Eloise: Oh, we didn't mean to interrupt anything. We just haven't heard so much life up here in a long time. I'm glad everyone is all right.

Bruce: Well, at least come meet my wife.

Narrator 3: Without anyone showing them where to go, the two women made the two right turns that took them down the hall to the kitchen.

Brid: (whispering to CJ) How did they know how to get to the kitchen?

Narrator 1: Mrs. Smithfork didn't cook like chefs on television: no neat little piles of matching chopped foods arrayed in colorful bits. The Smithfork kitchen had oozy liquid dripping from the countertops, sprinkles of herbs dusting the floor, and bits of vegetables scattered about. CJ and Brid felt a little embarrassed that their mom looked so messy in front of these prim women.

Mrs. Smithfork: Hi there – welcome!

Annika: Hello, ma'am. Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I work for your downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Munn. And my name is Annika.

Eloise: We just came up to say hello and, I guess, welcome you to the building. I'm embarrassed we haven't brought a housewarming gift.

Mrs. Smithfork: Would you like to stay for dinner tonight?

Eloise: Oh what a lovely invitation. Perhaps another time?

Mrs. Smithfork: Oh, I understand. We'll see you again.

Eloise: Yes, good-bye.

Bruce: Yes, and we'll keep the noise level down.

Narrator 2: The older lady nodded and grinned and went back to the elevator, with Annika trailing behind her.

Narrator 3: Brid still wondered why Mrs. Munn looked so familiar. She would have to find out later because the Smithfork children had another mystery to solve.

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