

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO HUMPHREY

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ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can media be a distraction?

The kids in Mrs. Brisbane's class love taking care of their hamster, Humphrey. The weekends are especially fun because one of them takes Humphrey home. This weekend, the lucky student is A. J.

The bus let us off close to A. J.'s house. It was a two-story old house with a big porch. As soon as I entered, I got a warm welcome from A. J.'s mom, his younger brother, Ty, his little sister, DeeLee, and his baby brother, Beau.

"Anthony James, introduce us to your little friend," his mom said, greeting us.

Anthony James? Everybody at school called A. J. by his initials or just "Aje."

"This is Humphrey," he answered.

"Hello, Humphrey," said Mrs. Thomas. "So how was your day, Anthony?"

"Lousy. Garth kept shooting rubber bands at me. He won't leave me alone."



"But you two used to be friends," his mother said.

"Used to be," said A. J. "Until he turned into a JERK."

Mom patted her son on the shoulder. "Well, you've got the whole weekend to get over it. Now take Humphrey into the den and get him settled."

Mrs. Brisbane called him Lower-Your-Voice-A. J. because A. J. always talked extra loud in class. I soon noticed that everybody at A. J.'s house talked extra loud. They had to, because in the background the TV was always **blaring**.

Now, every house I've been in so far has had a TV, and I've enjoyed some of the shows I've seen.

There's one channel that has nothing but the most frightening shows about wild animals attacking one another. I mean *wild*, like tigers and bears and hippopotamuses. (Gee, I hope that's not on our vocabulary test in the near future.) Those shows make me **appreciate** the protection of a nice cage. As long as the lock doesn't quite lock.

There's another channel that only has people in funny-looking clothes dancing and singing in very strange places. It makes me glad that I have a fur coat and don't have to figure out what to wear every day.

Mostly, I like the cartoon shows. Sometimes they have mice and rabbits and other interesting rodents, although I've never seen a hamster show. Yet.

Anyway, the difference at the Thomases' house is that the television is on *all the time*. There's a TV on a table across from a big comfy couch and a big comfy chair and someone's almost always sitting there watching. I know because they put my cage down on the floor next to the couch. I had a very good view of the TV.

I couldn't always hear the TV, though, because A. J.'s mother had a radio in the kitchen, which was blaring most of the time while she cooked or did crossword puzzles or talked on the phone. No matter what she did, the radio was always on.

When A. J.'s dad came home from work, he plopped down on the couch and watched TV while he played with the baby. Then A. J. and Ty plugged in some video games and played while Dad watched. DeeLee listened to the radio with her mom and danced around the kitchen.

When it was time for dinner, the whole family took plates and sat in the den so they could watch TV while they ate.

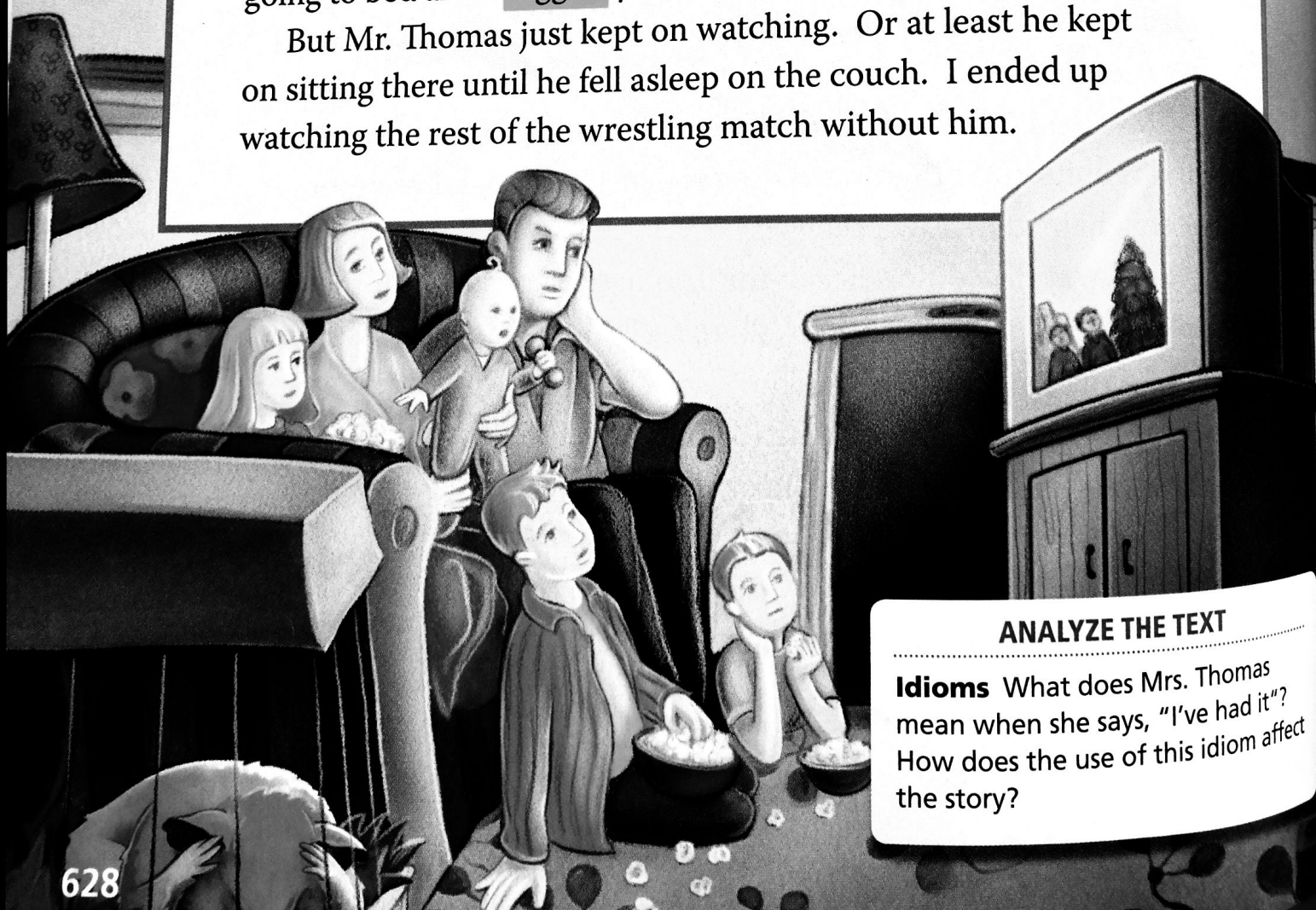
Then they watched TV some more. They made popcorn and kept watching.

Finally, the kids went to bed. The baby first, then DeeLee and later Ty and A. J.

After they were all in their rooms, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas kept watching TV and ate some ice cream.

Later, Mrs. Thomas yawned loudly. "I've had it, Charlie. I'm going to bed and I **suggest** you do, too," she said.

But Mr. Thomas just kept on watching. Or at least he kept on sitting there until he fell asleep on the couch. I ended up watching the rest of the wrestling match without him.



ANALYZE THE TEXT

Idioms What does Mrs. Thomas mean when she says, "I've had it"? How does the use of this idiom affect the story?

Unfortunately, the wrestler I was rooting for, Thor of Glore, lost. Finally, Mr. Thomas woke up, yawned, flicked off the TV and went upstairs to bed. Peace at last.

But the quiet only lasted about ten minutes. Soon Mom brought Beau downstairs and gave him a bottle while she watched TV. When Beau finally fell asleep, Mrs. Thomas yawned and flicked off the TV. Blessed relief.

Five minutes later, Mr. Thomas returned. "Sorry, hamster. Can't sleep," he mumbled to me as he flicked on the remote. He watched and watched and then dozed off again. But the TV stayed on, leaving me no choice but to watch a string of commercials for car waxes, weight-reducing programs, exercise machines and "Red-Hot Harmonica Classics."

The **combination** of being **nocturnal** and being bombarded with sight and sound kept me wide-awake.

At the crack of dawn, DeeLee tiptoed into the room, dragging her doll by its hair, and switched to a cartoon show about princesses.

She watched another show about cats and dogs. (Scary!) Then Mr. Thomas woke up and wanted to check some sports scores. Mrs. Thomas handed him the baby and his bottle and soon the older boys switched over to video games and their parents watched them play.

It was LOUD-LOUD-LOUD. But the Thomases didn't seem to notice.

"What do you want for breakfast?" Mom shouted.

"What?" Dad shouted louder.

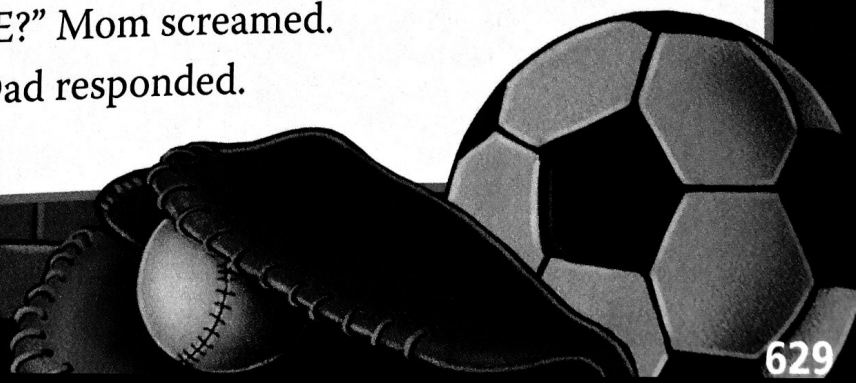
"WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR BREAKFAST?" Mom yelled.

"TOASTER WAFFLES!" Dad yelled louder.

"I CAN'T HEAR THE TV!" Ty hollered, turning up the volume.

"DO YOU WANT JUICE?" Mom screamed.

"CAN'T HEAR YOU!" Dad responded.



And so it went. With each new question, the sound on the TV would be turned up higher and higher until it was positively deafening.

Then Mom switched on her radio.

The Thomases were a perfectly nice family, but I could tell it was going to be a very long and noisy weekend unless I came up with a Plan.

So, I spun on my wheel for a while to help me think. And I thought and thought and thought some more. And then it came: the Big Idea. I probably would have come up with it sooner if I could have heard myself think!

Around noon, the Thomases were all watching the football game on TV. Or rather, Mr. Thomas was watching the football game on TV while A. J. and Ty shouted questions at him. Mrs. Thomas was in the kitchen listening to the radio and talking on the phone. DeeLee played peekaboo with the baby in the cozy chair.

No one was watching me, so I carefully opened the lock-that-doesn't-lock on my cage and made a quick exit.

Naturally, no one could hear me skittering across the floor as I made my way around the outside of the room, over to the space behind the TV cabinet. Then, with **Great Effort**, I managed to pull out the plug: one of the most difficult **feats** of my life.



ANALYZE THE TEXT

Point of View Who is telling this story? How does that affect what you know about the events?

The TV went silent. Beautifully, blissfully, silently silent. So silent, I was afraid to move. I waited behind the cabinet, frozen. The Thomases stared at the TV screen as the picture slowly went dark.

"Ty, did you hit that remote?" Mr. Thomas asked.

"Naw. It's under the table."

"Anthony, go turn that thing on again," Mr. Thomas said.

A. J. jumped up and hit the power button on the TV. Nothing happened.

"It's broken!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Thomas rushed in from the kitchen. "What happened?"

Mr. Thomas explained that the TV had gone off and they discussed how old it was (five years), whether it had a guarantee (no one knew) and if Mr. Thomas could fix it (he couldn't).

"Everything was fine and it went off—just like that. I guess we'd better take it in to get fixed," Mr. Thomas said.

"How long will it take?" DeeLee asked in a whiny voice.

"I don't know," her dad replied.

"How much will it cost?" Mrs. Thomas asked.

"Oh. Yeah," her husband said. "I forgot. We're a little low on funds right now."

The baby began to cry. I thought the rest of the family might start crying, too.

"Well, I get paid next Friday," Dad said.

A. J. jumped up and waved his hands. "That's a whole week away!"

"I'm going to Grandma's house. Her TV works," said Ty.

"Me, too," DeeLee chimed in.

"Grandma's got her bridge club over there tonight," Mom said.

"I know," said Dad. "Let's go to a movie."

"Do you know how much it costs to go to a movie?" Mom asked. "Besides, we can't take the baby."

"Oh."

They whined and bickered for quite a while. They got so loud, I managed to scamper back to my cage, unnoticed. Then I guess I dozed off. Remember, I had hardly had a wink of sleep since I'd arrived. The bickering was a nice, soothing background after all that racket.

I was only half-asleep when the squabbling changed.

"But there's nothing to do," DeeLee whined.

Her father chuckled. "Nothing to do! Girl, my brothers and I used to spend weekends at my grandma's house and she never had a TV. Wouldn't allow it!"

"What did you do?" A. J. asked.

"Oh, we were busy every minute," he recalled. "We played cards and board games and word games. And we dug in her garden and played tag." He chuckled again. "A lot of times we just sat on the porch and talked. My grandma . . . she could *talk*."

"What'd you talk about?" Ty wondered.

"Oh, she'd tell us stories about her growing up. About funny things, like the time her uncle was walking in his sleep and went to church in his pajamas."

Mrs. Thomas gasped. "Oh, go on now, Charlie."

"I'm just telling you what she told us. He woke up in the middle of the service, looked down and there he was, in his blue-and-white striped pajamas."

I let out a squeak of surprise and the kids all giggled.

Then Mrs. Thomas told a story about a girl in her class who came to school in her slippers by accident one day. "Yes, the fuzzy kind," she explained with a big smile.

They talked and talked and Dad got out some cards and they played a game called Crazy Eights and another one called Pig where they put their fingers on their noses and laughed like hyenas. When Beau fussed, they took turns jiggling him on their knees.

After a while, Mrs. Thomas gasped. "Goodness' sakes! It's an hour past your bedtimes."

The children all groaned and asked if they could play cards tomorrow and in a few minutes all the Thomases had gone to bed and it was QUIET-QUIET-QUIET for the first time since I'd arrived.

Early in the morning, Ty, DeeLee and A. J. raced downstairs and played Crazy Eights. Later, they ran outside and threw a football around the yard.

The Thomases were having breakfast with Beau when the phone rang. Mr. Thomas talked for a few minutes, mostly saying "Uh-huh, that's fine." When he hung up, he told Mrs. Thomas, "We're going to have a visitor. But don't tell Anthony James."

Oooh, a mystery. I like mysteries because they're fun to solve. Then again I don't like mysteries because I don't like not knowing what's going on. So I waited and waited.



A few hours later, the doorbell rang.

The visitor turned out to be Garth Tugwell and his father!

"I really appreciate this," Mr. Tugwell told the Thomases.

"It was Mrs. Brisbane's idea. Since Garth can't have Humphrey at our house right now, she suggested that he could help A. J. take care of him over here."

Sounds like Mrs. Brisbane. As if I'm trouble to take care of.

But Garth had been crying because he couldn't have me.

So maybe—maybe—she was trying to be nice.

After Mr. Tugwell left, Mr. Thomas called A. J. in.

A. J. ran into the room and practically backed out again when he saw Garth.

"We have a guest," said Mr. Thomas. "Shake hands, Anthony.

Garth is here to help you take care of Humphrey."

A. J. and Garth reluctantly shook hands.

"How come?" asked A. J.

Garth shrugged his shoulders. "Mrs. Brisbane said to."

"Well, come on. We'll clean his cage and get it over with," A. J. said.

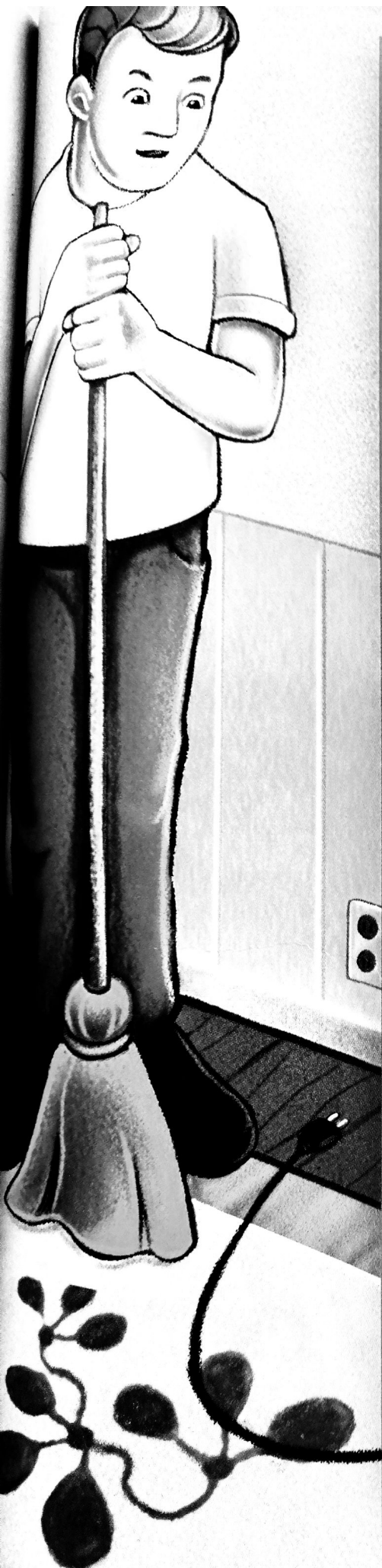
The boys didn't talk much while they cleaned the cage. But they started giggling when they cleaned up my potty corner. (I don't know why that makes everybody giggle.)

After they stopped giggling, they started talking and kidding around. They decided to let me out of the cage, so they took a set of old blocks from DeeLee's room and built me a huge maze. Oh, I love mazes!

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Theme A. J. learns a lesson when Garth comes to his house. What is this lesson? How does this lesson relate to the theme of the story?





When we were all tired of that game, A. J. offered to teach Garth to play Crazy Eights and then Ty and DeeLee joined them in a game of Go Fish.

Nobody mentioned the TV. Nobody shot any rubber bands.

Later in the afternoon, the kids were all outside playing football. I was fast asleep until Mrs. Thomas came into the den with a broom and started sweeping. A minute later, Mr. Thomas entered.

"What are you doing, hon?"

"What does it look like? I'm sweeping. You know, all the snacking we do in here makes a real mess on the floor," she said.

"Beau's asleep?" her husband asked.

"Uh-huh."

Mr. Thomas walked over to his wife and took the broom away from her. "Then you sit down and rest a spell, hon. I'll sweep. Go on, don't argue."

Mrs. Thomas smiled and thanked him and sat down on the couch. Mr. Thomas swept all around the outside of the room.

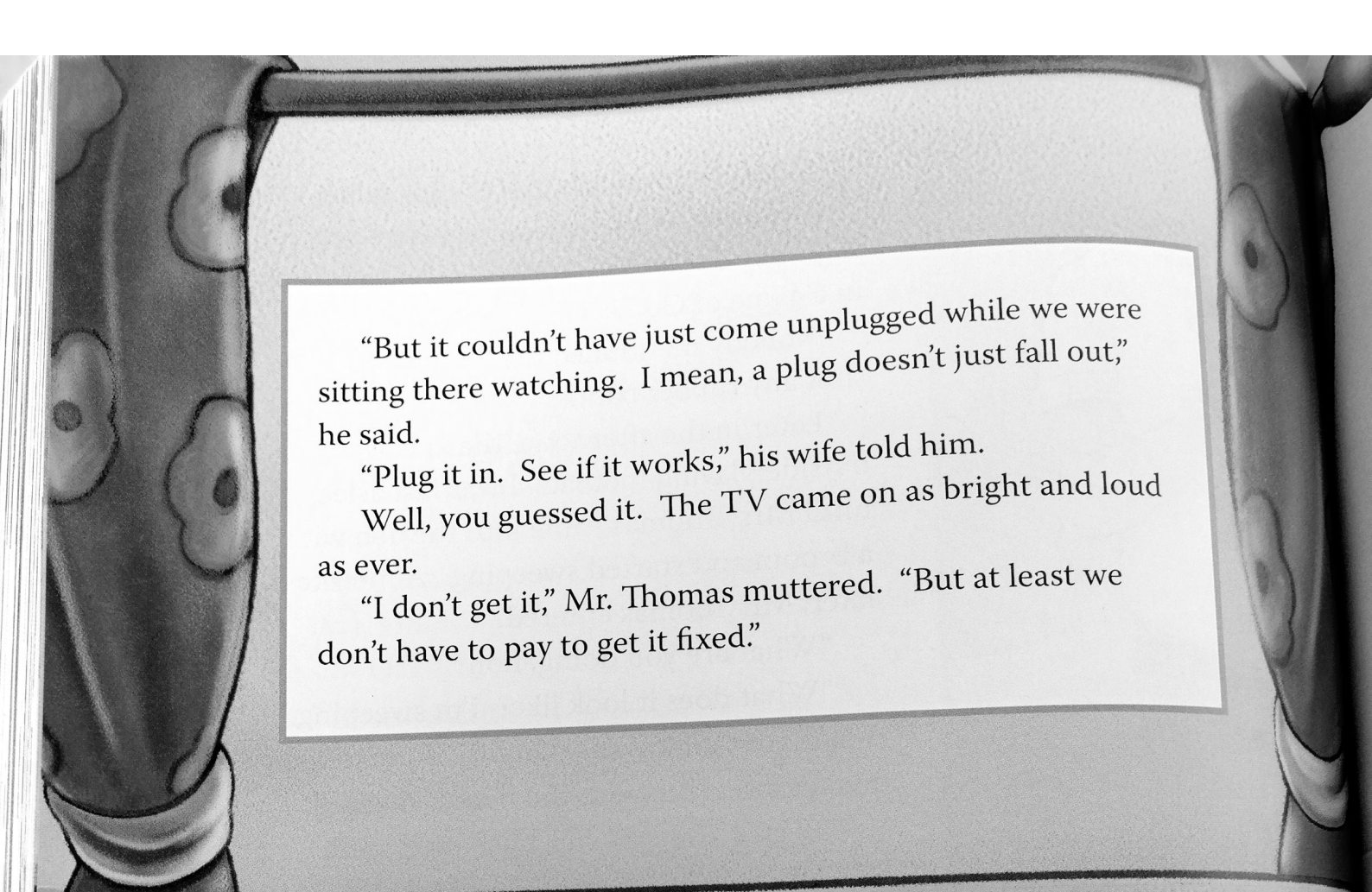
Even behind the TV. Uh-oh.

When he got there, he stopped sweeping and leaned down.

"Well, I'll be," he muttered.

"What's wrong?" asked Mrs. Thomas.

"The TV is unplugged," he said. "It's unplugged!" He came out from behind the TV, plug in hand and a very puzzled look on his face.

A black and white illustration of a window with curtains. The curtains have a pattern of large, stylized eyes. The window is framed by a simple border.

“But it couldn’t have just come unplugged while we were sitting there watching. I mean, a plug doesn’t just fall out,” he said.

“Plug it in. See if it works,” his wife told him. Well, you guessed it. The TV came on as bright and loud as ever.

“I don’t get it,” Mr. Thomas muttered. “But at least we don’t have to pay to get it fixed.”



Mrs. Thomas stared at the screen for a few seconds, then glanced out the window at the kids playing happily outside.

"Charlie, what do you say we keep it unplugged for a couple more days?" she asked. "We just won't tell the kids."

Mr. Thomas grinned. Then he bent down and unplugged the TV. "Couldn't hurt," he said.

He put down the broom and sat on the couch near his wife and the two of them just sat there in the den, giggling like—well, like Stop-Giggling-Gail!

Suddenly, Mr. Thomas looked over at me.

"You don't mind a little peace and quiet, do you, Humphrey?"

"NO-NO-NO!" I squeaked. And I promptly fell asleep.