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FIT TO PRINT

CAST

CARR VAN ANDA: newspaper editor

“POPS” CONNOR: elderly journalist

C.J.: society reporter

JAKE: cub reporter

ADOLPH S OCHS (*pronounced “Oaks”*): newspaper proprietor

SVENSON: naval architect / ship designer

COPY BOY (or GIRL): young ‘gopher’

FRANKLIN: vice-president of a shipping line

CJ’s part has been written for a female; other characters are male, which reflects the less enlightened perceptions of the Edwardian era. However, it would be possible for some of the other parts – eg Jake, or the Copy Boy – to be played by females also, with minor adjustments to the text as required

A major news feature always catches the public eye, but sometimes the story behind the news can be interesting as well. In the early years of the twentieth century, when wireless was in its infancy and communication could still be uncertain, a newspaper might have to build up its account from mere fragments with a mixture of skill and guesswork. When the first news of the Titanic’s collision with an iceberg reached New York, there was just time to get it in the morning editions – but with very little information. This play is inspired by the true account of how Carr van Anda, legendary Editor of the New York Times, alone took the bold step of declaring that the ship had actually sunk. For an anxious day, until the tragedy was finally confirmed, it seemed as if he might have been almost too bold

*The curtain rises on a traditional newspaper office. The period is 1912. It is after midnight. On the glass of a window is painted, in reverse, **New York Times**. A door lettered **EDITOR** leads in from offstage. Times Square and the New York skyline could be visible through the glass (but note that this is the pre-neon era). A large slogan on the wall says “**ALL THE NEWS THAT’S FIT TO PRINT**”. There is also a wall map of North America. There are a couple of desks or tables, on which are phones, wire baskets, typewriters, and garbage bins on the floor next to them. The Editor’s desk carries a framed photograph of a young woman. There is a*

coat-rack by the door, and a ticker-tape machine stands at the back on a small table or pedestal by itself. Generally the office is busy and cluttered.

Carr van Anda, the EDITOR, is sitting at his desk, with green eye-shade and blue pencil in hand, reading through a sheaf of papers

EDITOR: Yup. Nope (*crosses a line or two out*) Yup. Uh-huh. (*places it on top of others in out-tray, picks up next sheet*) Hmm. (*doubtfully*) Hmm. (*considers, then scribbles some extra words in the margin*) Uh-Hmm. (*affirmatively, placing it in basket, picking up next*) Oh-ho-ho! (*laughing, shaking head*) No no no. (*places sheet separately from rest, then shouts*) Copy!

COPY (*entering*): Yes, Mr Van Anda?

EDITOR: Take these down the press room, slip them in on page five or six, ok?

COPY (*indicating the separate sheet*): This one too?

EDITOR: Not that one. The lawyers would never let it through.

COPY (*glancing at it, wide-eyed*): Gosh, sir, did he really do ... *that*?

EDITOR: Sure he did, but his father's a senator, and his uncle is (*in pseudo-Italian accent*) family. So, in the best tradition of democracy, another slimy rat escapes. (*crumples sheet up and tosses it into the bin*)

COPY: That it for the late final?

EDITOR: I guess, unless something big breaks in the next few minutes. Tell 'em to stand by to roll.

COPY: Sure thing, Mr Van Anda. (*he grabs the papers and rushes out, almost colliding with POPS and JAKE who are entering*)

POPS: Whoa, young man!

COPY: Oops! Sorry, guys. (*he exits*)

POPS (*looking after him, shaking head*): I dunno. Rush, rush, rush. (*to JAKE*) Y'know, Jake, when I started in this business, we went at a civilised pace. None of this mad gaddin' about.

EDITOR: Pops, when you started, they were still carvin' newspapers on stone tablets.

JAKE: Bet you seen some changes, Mr Connor?

EDITOR: Watch it, Jake, once he's started on the good old days, he'll never stop.

POPS: I seen a lot, son, and it ain't always improvement.

EDITOR: You can't stop progress, Pops, so we gotta grab it with both hands. The old century was iron and steam, but the twentieth century's steel and electricity – just look around you.

POPS: Yeah, I don't suppose we did much in the century of ... iron and steam? Just discovered gas, electricity, evolution, opened up America, mapped the globe ...

EDITOR: Sure, they did lots of things, the foundation of our modern world. But now we're at the cutting edge – and part of that cutting edge is communications. We're in a revolution, Pops, and news is at the heart of it.

POPS: Humph. Ain't nothing cutting edge about newspapers. They've been printed here for more'n two hundred years, and a lot longer in Europe, I guess.

C.J. enters, takes her hat and coat off and hangs them on the stand

C.J.: He giving you the twentieth-century lecture, Pops?

EDITOR: It's a waste of time, C.J.

POPS (*indicating machine*): And we weren't slaves to them ticker-tape machines, neither.

JAKE: Yeah? Did you use carrier pigeons, Mr Connor?

POPS: C'mon, boy, I ain't that old. Course we had telegrams. They were wrote out by hand then, but least once the telegraph office closed, we got home for a good night's sleep. Now we sit waiting for that darned thing (*pointing at tickertape machine*) to spit out some new story so's we can redo our front page six times a night. 'T ain't natural.

JAKE: But what if a big story broke in the night? Didn't you update it?

POPS: In them days, all the little printing letters were put in by hand, one by one. That's a lot of work, you sure as hell didn't mess around once it was set – it just went in next day instead. But now ... with these new-fangled Linotype machines, tap a few keys and — whoof! you change the front page in twenty minutes.

JAKE: But that's good, Mr Connor? You always get the latest news.

POPS: Well, we did re-do the front page once.

JAKE: Oh?

POPS: It was the night Abe Lincoln died.

C.J. and the EDITOR exchange glances – they've heard this story before, probably many times

JAKE (*wide-eyed*): You remember that, Mr Connor?

POPS: Ain't the kind of thing you forget easy, son. Course, I was just a kid then, a cub reporter like yourself, one of the first stories I ever worked on.

JAKE: Go on, Pops, tell me.

POPS (*walks around, acting it out in melodramatic fashion*): It were late, like this, we were about to pack up for the night when there was a hammerin' at the door. "Telegram! Special Delivery!" "Hah!" mutters our Editor, "What's so special this time of night?" He tore it open, and stood there with his jaw dropped. (*he pauses and looks round dramatically*)

JAKE (*breathlessly*): Yeah?

POPS: "What is it, sir?" I asked – in them days we had respect for our elders, son, we said "Sir" and not just "Pops" or whatever – "What is it, sir?" He read it out. (*strikes dramatic pose*) "Washington, 9.30pm. President shot by assassin in private box at theater, stop; in coma, stop; not expected to live. Stop." Well! We just stared. Then, cool as a cucumber, he says: "Connor!" "Sir?" "Tell them to stop printing and stand by for a new front page." I tore downstairs. "Hold the presses!" I shouted. "The President's been shot!" I tell you, boy, you'd have heard a pin drop.

JAKE: Wow! That was something!

POPS: Sure was. Mind, dead presidents ain't such a novelty nowadays.

EDITOR: Not since they shot McKinley, anyway.

C.J.: I reckon that was an outraged fashion lover. McKinley had such an offensive taste in neckties.

EDITOR: Yes, one in five, isn't it?

JAKE: What?

EDITOR: A one in five chance of not getting to the end of your term of office alive, if you're President.

JAKE: That's a kinda high risk.

C.J.: Must be hellish getting life insurance.

EDITOR: Oh, and Jake, you'd better update President's Taft's photo and obituary – it's in that file drawer there.

JAKE: The president? Is he dead too?

C.J.: I don't know how you'd tell, he's so boring ...

EDITOR: No, but we keep it up to date, just in case.

POPS: We live in dangerous times, son. Mind C.J. don't stab you with her barbed wit.

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LATER, the morning after the decision has been made to run with the Titanic story despite lack of confirmation of the sinking from the White Star Line ...

The lights FADE UP; it is early next morning. From outside there are sounds of traffic, trolley-cars, deliveries, old-style car horns, the elevated railroad rattling past in the distance. The EDITOR is asleep in his chair, and JAKE is slumped over his desk.

The Proprietor, ADOLPH OCHS, enters, furious, with a bundle of newspapers under his arm

OCHS (*roars*): Van Anda!

EDITOR (*waking with a start*): What? Oh! Mr Ochs! What time is it?

OCHS: It's twenty after eight.

EDITOR: Sorry. But we had a big story last night. It was...

OCHS: I know what it was. I've seen the paper. "Titanic Sinks!" Why didn't you phone me?

EDITOR: Why, Mr Ochs?

OCHS: For one thing, because it's *my* paper.

EDITOR: I suppose. A terrific piece of writing, yeah?

OCHS: I might think so if I hadn't read the other papers.

EDITOR: How do you mean?

OCHS (*holding out papers*): See here. "Titanic holed by iceberg, being towed to Halifax." Or here. "Titanic hits iceberg, all passengers saved." Or this one. "All saved from Titanic after Collision". Not "Titanic Sinks". Not "1500 feared drowned". (*as he shows each paper he dumps it onto the desk in front of the EDITOR*)

EDITOR: Eh? Let me see ... (*he takes papers and scans them*) But Mr Ochs, I assure you ...

OCHS: Mr Van Anda, when I bought this paper sixteen years ago, its circulation was nine thousand. So I took a deep breath and cut the price from three cents to one cent; the other proprietors thought I was nuts. In four years, I'd raised the circulation from nine to seventy-five thousand, and now it's heading for a quarter-million. How did I do that? *(he looks round and spots JAKE, who has been trying to act invisible)* You, boy!

JAKE *(points to slogan)*: Er, "All the news that's fit to print"?

OCHS: Exactly. That's *news*, Van Alda, not fairy stories. Those I leave to the *New York Sun*. They're always happy to print hoaxes. *(he takes the 'Sun' from the Editor's desk and dumps it in front of JAKE, who scans it with trepidation)*

EDITOR: But Mr Ochs ...

OCHS: Now we're a national institution. *(waves arm at window)* Goddam, they even renamed this place after us! Times Square, New York!

EDITOR: I know ...

OCHS: Crossroads of the universe!

EDITOR: Sure ...

OCHS: And now you give me this, which I need like a hole in the head.

EDITOR: But ...

OCHS: Do you know how cut-throat it is in the newspaper business? I don't need to make enemies. And this story ...

EDITOR: But ...

OCHS: Van Anda, I've spoken to the shipping line, and I'm assured by no less than Mr Franklin, their Manager – a personal friend, by the way – that your story is not true. Don't you know the ship's unsinkable?

EDITOR: Mr Svenson says ...

OCHS: I know what Mr Svenson says, I read it in the paper. *My* paper! Mr Franklin says that, according to latest wireless intelligence, the ship's proceeding at this very moment to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dammit, they've even chartered a train to take the relatives to meet it!

C.J. enters, hangs her hat and coat on the stand

C.J.: Boss, I've just come from the White Star offices in Broadway. They're besieged by relatives and reporters. Look, you ought to know ... Oh! Mr Ochs!

OCHS: Hello, C.J. What should we know? That last night's story is a pack of lies?

C.J.: Well, er, that ... they've given out a statement, anyway.

She hands a paper to the EDITOR

EDITOR *(reading)*: "Vice President of White Star Line Philip AS Franklin states that, even if Titanic had hit ice, it could float indefinitely. We place absolute confidence in the ship. We believe that it is unsinkable".

OCHS: You see?

EDITOR: Have they heard from the ship itself?

C.J.: Not yet. Franklin's sent a wireless inquiry to Captain Smith...

EDITOR: So they don't *know* anything yet ...

C.J.: I said we should go cautious on this one, boss ...

OCHS: Glad to see someone's got sense. *(he heads for the door, and turns)* Remember, van Anda, you once said, when you retire, you might move upstate somewhere, start a small chicken farm?

EDITOR: Yeah?

OCHS: Maybe this is the time to go buy a book on chickens.

He storms out

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First Performed February 2003 at the Churchill Theatre, Edinburgh by Leittheatre with Dougie Arbuckle; Alan Jeffreys; Susan Duffy; Billy Renfrew; Nigel Graham; Andy Powley; Evan Popplestone; and Alex Purves

April 2003 – Winner of SCDA Scott Salver Award for best new one-act play

*“How far does a newspaper go to gain the upper hand in bringing the news to the people?
Decisions are made and only time will tell whether the gamble pays off”*

Scene Magazine

A CD of graphic material props including newspaper facsimiles etc is available if required

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